

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY



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The Key of Life





THE KEY OF LIFE

BOOKS BY
FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

COLD HARBOUR

SEA HORSES

THE DARK TOWER

LOVE IS ENOUGH

THE KEY OF LIFE

THE KEY OF LIFE

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New York

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PART ONE



CASTEL DITCHES

I

THE THIRD-CLASS carriage into which Ruth Morgan changed at Craven Arms was like a refrigerator van. Its air grew colder and damper every moment as it penetrated the Western valleys; her breath condensed in a white film upon the streaming window-panes; outside, beneath the jolt of wheels, she heard a brawling of streams in flood.

The signs were ominous and disconcerting. That morning, as she left the school for up-to-date young ladies at Cheltenham, where now, for more than a year, she had held the post of games-mistress, Spring had proclaimed itself in a mild, moist air, by whose refractions sunlight seemed concentrated, as through a burning-glass, upon the sleepy watering-place. She had driven to the station past files of static invalids, put out, on bath-chairs and benches and in donkey-carriages, like sick pot-plants in the sun. She had set forth, that morning, with the soft fire of Spring in her blood, with a sense of completion and release from the bonds of a term's routine. Never had she looked forward to holidays so eagerly before. Smiling at her own childishness she had even ticked off the lessening days on her calendar. For Spring was coming, full, by itself, of

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vague, enthralling promise; and all the loveliest memories of her childhood at Castel Ditches, in the days before her mother died, had been associated with the smell of cowslip, primrose, daffodil, and the weak cries of lambs that echoed in the hills.

Now, in exchange for these unreasoning anticipations of happiness, she heard no sound but that of the train plunging downward through spatters of sleet and a hoarse brawl of storm-water; there was no scent in her nostrils but the steamy, sulphurous odour of the stale railway-carriage, and no hope in her heart. She realized, uncomfortably, the mistake she had made in packing her fleecy coat and setting out that morning in her Spring tailor-made. An hour's exposure to sleet or rain would ruin both. The whole term's savings wasted; herself arriving at Castel Ditches like a drowned rat for Diana to laugh at!

If she had time to unpack her coat? There was no time. By the cessation of the engine's stertors she knew that they were already nearing Lesswardine. Resigned and shivering she rose and surveyed herself in a glazed, oblong picture of some seaside resort that served her for mirror. The sight of her own face, the pale but healthy skin, blue eyes, wide-set, beneath darker, level eyebrows, the gentle mouth, straight and firm-lipped, above the strong white throat, did not content her. Her thoughts were with the poor, predestinate straw hat, the immaculate French-grey tailor-made, so soon to be spotted and distorted, which gave to her tall figure an aspect of slim athletic grace. In any case, she

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reflected, Diana would have scoffed at a "get-up" which emphasised so clearly the difference of their age and physical type. Diana was thirty-five—twelve years older than herself—short, determined, sanguine, with a condensed and bitter darkness, silver threads showing themselves obstinately through the glossy cap of her coarse black hair. Diana, desperately engrossed in the sombre life of the farm, had no use for airs or graces. With Diana, Ruth knew that all her natural attributes, all those Spring perfumes that youth carried with it, would pass for affectations of an unnatural delicacy and refinement. Now that the moment of their meeting grew nearer she dreaded it. For reasons spiritual as well as physical she wished to goodness she'd put on navy-blue. In a determined effort to be ugly she crammed the fair masses of wavy hair, which not even damp could straighten, under the doomed hat, and turned up the collar of her coat until her white neck was hidden.

The train pulled up at the platform. Better get it over. Ruth picked up her valises, one in either hand, and made a dash for the doorway. The floor of the booking-office was foul with trodden sleet. Outside, in the darkness, the high dog-cart from Castel Ditches stood waiting with Frank, her father's cowman, on the box. Frank had driven into Lesswardine with the evening milk-cans and taken a pint at the Buffalo on the way. He stared at Ruth sullenly while she struggled with her luggage, but didn't stir a finger to help her. Nobody at Castel Ditches put himself out for any one but John Morgan, the master, whom they all feared.

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The very depression of her arrival compelled her to seem cheerful.

"Good evening, Frank," she called, "how's everybody?"

"Evening, Miss Ruth," he grunted, without stirring.

She threw her luggage into the back of the cart, wedging it between the empty milk-cans. How familiar to her senses was that faint smell of tinny sourness; how familiar, as she jumped up beside him, Frank's own odour of beer and straw and cow-sheds! A sudden blast of sleet swept her face. Her heart sank for the blue forget-me-nots.

"It's awfully cold, Frank," she said. "Haven't you a coat or anything that I can put over my shoulders?"

"Ay, it's a mucky night," he answered, pulling a moist, warm sack from the box on which he had been sitting, handing it to her as if he grudged parting with it.

"You've no idea," she said, as she wrapped the sacking that smelt of chicken meal round her, "how different it was in Cheltenham this morning."

He had no idea; and, what was more, he didn't care. The weather at Cheltenham meant nothing to him. Before him lay another hour of work by lantern light in the dark byres. Enough, for the moment, that his brain was pleasantly drugged with Mrs. Malpas's malt. He grunted and touched up the horse with a broken whip-stock.

Cowslip, primrose, daffodil . . . how should they live in a night like this? The hedgerows shuddered in the wind, scattering rain-drops like a dog that shakes its coat. The wild sky drooped above them; no shadow of mountain could

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be seen or felt. The stony lanes were like beds of torrents through which the steaming cob fought his way upward. And all around them, invisible in the night, the voices of streams that fed the Folly Brook with brown storm-water kept up a hoarse unceasing clamour. A cold world, drowned in winter! Now that the lighted train had puffed painfully away into the darkness, it seemed as if Ruth and Frank the cowman and the black cob were the only survivors of the deluge; as though the secret of human life had nearly been lost for ever and they were fighting their way through chaos to find it again.

Certainly they needn't look for it at Castel Ditches. The iron gate of the drive admitted them to a dark avenue so deeply felted with fallen beechmast that neither the black cob's hoof-beats nor the dog-cart's wheels could be heard. The front of the farm-house, whose grey length suddenly detached itself from the mist, seemed as dead as the darkness through which they had approached it. The doors were closed; the windows shuttered; no spark of light betrayed the existence of any life behind them. A sombre home-coming, Ruth reflected; and yet she could not quarrel with anything that simplified her first meeting with Diana or her father as this did. The place was still living, in its own dead-alive way. In the dark hall its faint, familiar odour assailed her; at the foot of the stairs the grandfather clock continued the leisurely ticking which had not ceased since she left it, three months before. The shallow stairs were friendly to her feet. Her small, low bedroom, smelling of old oak

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and lavender, gave her the thrill of an inanimate welcome. By the light of a single candle, she divested herself of her imprudent finery and put on the blue serge skirt and knitted jumper that was her morning wear at school, a costume so modest that not even Diana could sniff at it. So, pulling her strength together for the encounter, she descended to the dining-room.

II

THERE, AT the head of a vast mahogany table calculated to accommodate the enormous families of his own generation, John Morgan, her father, was sitting. A green-shaded oil-lamp, carried on a spindly pedestal of cut-glass, shed its cold light upon his features; the rugged forehead, rough-hewn and weathered like a cliff of limestone; the strong, pugnacious nose; the mouth, straight as her own, but wholly without softness, its shaven lips surrounded by a stubborn growth of iron-grey beard and whisker. A hard and rustic face. No stranger, seeing it, could have taken him for anything but a farmer; a farmer of the old kind, who could stand his liquor on market days and drive a bargain with the best. Yet when, across the lamplight, he caught sight of Ruth standing in the doorway, his cold eyes softened, his firm lips relaxed into a smile of welcome. He spoke. His voice betrayed the harsh inflections of his province. It was flat and toneless, as are the voices of the deaf.

"Well Ruth, how be 'ee? Come and give us a kiss."

She came to his side. His enormous arms enveloped her.

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She felt the scrubbing of his whiskers on her cheek; she recognized the smell of his homespun shoulder. In that moment the hard and alien figure became familiar and human. She felt tender toward him. She loved him. Why, she could not tell. His rough hands directed her to the chair beside him.

"Sit down, then, and take a morsel of supper. I reckon you must be famished."

He cut her a hunk of bread, a slice of pale cheese, and filled her glass with wintry, greenish cider. She was hungry; but as she began to eat she became conscious of Diana surveying her critically from the other side of the table. Diana had not even bidden her good-evening. Her critical, jealous scrutiny filled Ruth with a discomfort that chilled the glow of her father's kindly reception. Those cold and hostile eyes of Diana's, how she hated them! She felt that she had a right to resent their critical examination; yet, strangely enough, they filled her with a sense of guilt, as though she were personally responsible for Diana's discontent, as though the spacious life of the outer world which she represented and, by her college training, had attained, were an offence in the eyes of her sister, condemned to languish and grow old in the remoteness of Castel Ditches. Out of the richness of her own life it was her duty to be generous to Diana. How to be generous? She knew the other's deep-seated bitterness. Diana would sniff at any generosity that smelt, ever so little, of charity. Yet something must be attempted.

"Well, Diana," she said at length, "how are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right," Diana answered. "The same as

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usual. Nothing changes much in this part of the world. While you're amusing yourself with town-life, father and I go jogging along as usual."

Diana lowered her eyes and went on eating steadily like an animal, like her father. At Castel Ditches whole evenings would pass without a spoken word; Diana nursing her own jealous thoughts, John Morgan immersed in his reflections on the eternal, monotonous changes of mountain weather, the slow processes of growth and fruition, his endless, stubborn conflict with that unyielding soil. They ate in silence until their hunger was satisfied. The green shade of the lamp illuminated a narrow circle with its cold light. Outside that circle the ponderous mahogany furniture of the bleak room, the ugly silver cups that Morgan, in his youth, had won at agricultural shows, the masks of otters, the foxed steel engravings, surveyed them with an icy, impersonal dispassionateness: another generation of Morgans dreaming away their lives as their fathers had done before them.

To Ruth, in whom life was still so young, so passionate, so vivid, the atmosphere of the Castel Ditches dining-room was like that of a tomb. Its silence, its inertia, its breath of mortality enveloped her hopes and throttled them; its chill invaded her bones; she shivered.

Diana's little eyes missed nothing.

"What's wrong with you now?" she said. "Have you caught cold?"

"Perhaps it's the change of climate," Ruth suggested.

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"Climate!" Diana scoffed. "I'll tell you what it is. With all these fancy ideas in your head you're not properly clothed. I can see with my own eyes you've got no corsets on. Indecent, that's what I call it, showing your figure like that. I wouldn't show myself to the men on the farm like you are for a hundred pounds. You'd better go upstairs and fetch a jacket if you're cold, hadn't she, father?"

John Morgan answered nothing. He rarely took the trouble to answer Diana, and Ruth knew that it would be wasting time to call for his support.

With difficulty she suppressed her annoyance. However modestly she had been clothed Diana would have had a dig at her. She defended herself good-humouredly.

"You know I don't wear corsets, Diana. I've been taught that they're unhygienic. You forget that I come from Cheltenham where it's much warmer. On a night like this I should have thought you'd light a fire."

"A fire? Good Lord, what next? Fires at the end of April, and coal at forty shillings a ton? You're nesh, Ruth, that's what's the matter with you. If you're as cold as that I'll soon find you some work to warm you up. If you made fifty pounds of butter, as I do, before breakfast, you wouldn't be screaming at the cold. Isn't that so, dad?"

She shouted the last words in John Morgan's ear. "Ruth says she's cold," she repeated in a high strained voice. "I tell her that if she made fifty pounds of butter before breakfast she wouldn't feel cold."

"Cold?" John Morgan repeated.

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"Yes, cold, she says; she'd better go to bed. Perhaps she'd like a warming-pan."

John Morgan grunted. He pushed his plate away, rinsed his mouth with a last draught of cider, and waddled with his gnarled rheumatic legs towards an arm-chair, upholstered in horse-hair, that stood beside the empty grate. He sank into it with a sigh and lit his pipe. There was no sound in the room but that of his forced sucking and the spatter of rain on the shuttered window-panes.

"I reckon those chaps that are excavating the Ditches will get a bellyful of wet to-night," he breathed, "I'm glad I'm not under canvas like them. If it goes on pouring like this the trenches'll be full of water and they'll have to give up the job."

"The Ditches?" Ruth asked. "They're excavating the Ditches?"

"What's that? . . . Aye, digging," her father muttered between the puffs of his shag. "It's this new University, or whatever they call it, in North Bromwich that's taken it into its head to excavate the Roman remains. I reckon they've not found anything yet to speak of; but I can't complain." He chuckled grimly. "They pay me rent for the worst grazing we've got, and if the weather drives them off it'll be a good riddance. Those labourers of theirs are a poaching lot of devils. If they stay here we shan't have a rabbit left. A good riddance, that's what I'd call it."

"But who's directing the excavation?" Ruth asked eagerly.

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The proud line of the earth fortress from which the farm took its name had always tempted her imagination. "I suppose they've sent some professor from North Bromwich."

"There you go!" Diana put in bitterly. "That's just like you, Ruth. Always on the look out for strangers." She laughed. "You needn't flatter yourself or get excited, my dear. There's only one young man, and I shouldn't think he's your kind. Still, there's nothing like trying."

"I couldn't say rightly if he's a professor," John Morgan continued slowly. "I reckon he's a bit on the young side for that. A decent young fellow, I should say. Always waves good-day to me when I ride past. But this digging's a fool's game for all that. Throwing good money away to start with. Wasting the labour they might build us live people a road with on those old Romans who've been dead this thousand years. That's how I figure it out."

His sentence ended in a fit of coughing; for the evening pipe, which no doctor could induce him to forswear, always touched up the bronchitis that hung about his lungs all winter like water in the sodden valley bottom. Diana, who knew better than to interrupt her father in one of his rare moments of self-expression, renewed, in a malicious whisper, her attack on Ruth.

"You hear what dad says—'a decent young fellow.' That's going a long way for him. Now that you're a lady at large, Ruth, I should make the most of my chances if I were you. You'd better get yourself dolled up to-morrow in

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some of your smart Cheltenham clothes and go out picking cowslips or something pretty of that kind. You never know your luck. With all the experience you've had. . . ."

"Oh, Di, shut up!" Ruth cried, rising with her cheeks on flame. Her heart was sick and angry. It had begun again, this hateful undertone of Diana's whispers, too low for any ears but her own to hear; this bitter never-ending mockery that poisoned life at Castel Ditches, turning her beauty into a vulgar lure, tainting her most innocent desires with common motives, making her pitiful culture an affectation! Diana smiled malevolently at her show of spirit.

"I see you haven't left your temper behind you, Ruth," she said with an exaggerated placidity. Her lips were gentle, but her black eyes bored like gimlets. "Though why you should take on like that I don't know. I suppose you don't pretend that you aren't fond of men? Lord knows you tried hard enough last Christmas with George Baggot. It wasn't my fault that you didn't pull it off."

"George Baggot? Oh, Di, you make me sick! D'you think I'm interested in a lump like that? If I wanted to marry—which I don't, thank God—I shouldn't run after your farming friends."

"Oh, no, of course you wouldn't," Diana purred softly; "you're far too much of a lady to marry in your own class; you're far too precious for people like us! All the same that didn't prevent you riding in George Baggot's motor car when you wanted to go to the hunt-ball, did it? Only when George saw your airs and graces and turned you down. . . ."

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"Diana, that's a lie. It's like you to believe it!"

"I'm not such a fool as I look," Diana murmured. "I can use my own eyes."

"George Baggot . . ." the words stifled her. "George Baggot thought he could make love to me as if I were a hop-picker. He made me loathe the sight of him and I told him so. Baggot is a pig and thinks of women as if they were pigs."

"What's that? What's that?" John Morgan grunted. The familiar words had penetrated the dimness of his hearing. "George Baggot, did you say? What's that about pigs?"

His interruption offered Ruth an avenue of escape. She crossed to his chair and spoke into his ear.

"I'm tired, dad," she said, "I'm going to bed. Good-night."

"Bed? Well, it's past nine," he murmured. As Ruth kissed him he pulled out his silver watch, whose mysterious ticking had enchanted her childhood, and began to wind it up with an old-fashioned key. "George Baggot, did you say? Frank tells me George has some goodish heifers in Rodger's sale at Lesswardine to-morrow. I mean to have a look at them. Breakfast at half-past seven, Di. We've got to make an early start."

Diana nodded vigorously. John Morgan's deafness had taught her not to waste words. She smiled. In the bright businesslike smiles that she gave to her father there was no bitterness. It seemed as if these two understood each other, exchanging not so much affection as a sort of loyalty, in a

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relation as utterly devoid of emotion or sentiment as a political alliance. Neither demanded more of the other; both were content with the rigorous performance of the contract's inhuman obligations. To Ruth, whose heart was full of love to give and open to receive, this staid agreement seemed a thing of horror. The kiss, which, in a sudden revulsion of tenderness, pity, gratitude—there was no word to meet it—she had given to her father's grizzled cheek, seemed wasted and unprofitable. Its momentary emotion withered as it bloomed, like a precocious bud nipped by frost. She could have cried for the utter, lonely helplessness of this home-coming. An urgent need to escape from it overwhelmed her. Diana's coldly curious eyes were on her as she hurried to the door. Upon Diana's lips remained the image of that bright, fixed smile. Her voice came quietly:

"Breakfast at half-past seven. Don't forget. Why, haven't you even the manners to say good-night?"

III

IN HER OWN bedroom, so strange, yet so curiously familiar, Ruth recovered her composure. The very permanence of its contents shed an influence of quietude, recalling, with an air of poignant actuality, days of her girlhood—those brilliant, eternal Springs in which her life had known no care. Inside those narrow walls time had stood still. They enclosed an inviolable fortress, a tower of refuge, within which no hostile power could penetrate. This corner of earth was her own,

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inalienably. Within it her passionate identity was safe . . . even from Diana. She sighed with satisfaction as she turned the key behind her.

By this time the rain had ceased. With April fickleness the sky was clearing. The brilliance of the moon, late-risen, washed to a clarity of silver the lucid sky above the line of Castel Ditches, that imperious earthwork which gave the farm its name and dominated, with its crest, beaked, like a watchful bird of prey, the confused valleys of the upper Teme. The lower slopes were still hazy with moon-vanquished mist above which the beaked summit rose monstrous and detached, like a mass of petrified cloud. Something of the monument's age, its stability, its remoteness from the small affairs of life infused her tempestuous spirit with awe and calmness, gathering her up into its own quiet immensity. The moon was so bright that she had no need of candles. Its light seemed positively to warm the air to a milky tepidness, to caress her gleaming shoulders as she undressed. It was difficult to believe that anyone could be perturbed on a night of such serenity, such rapt stillness, so sweet a solitude. A sense of healthy tiredness possessed her limbs. She lay down, dreamily, vaguely contented, listening to the owl-haunted silence, brooding on the moonlit lands that her body had traversed that day, until she fell asleep. . . .

When she awoke next morning a heavy mist had fallen, blotting out the hill-shapes that moonlight had revealed, isolating the lonely farmstead like a sullen sea. In the

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fatigue of the night before she had forgotten to wind her watch. The universal diffusion of white light made it impossible to guess what time it was. Half-past seven. She remembered Diana's final warning overnight.

When she came down into the frigid dining-room her father, handsome in a full-skirted riding-coat and speckled cravat, had nearly finished breakfast. Diana, in a tight black tailor-made costume, brown kid gloves, and a severe veiled hat, that Ruth had remembered for years, was calling shrilly to the girl to pack the pats of butter and be careful with those eggs. She darted to and fro in the passage, singing to herself, breaking the words of the song and picking them up again determinedly. Ruth knew that sound so well: Diana's unhappy singing.

John Morgan shuffled his gaitered legs under the table and wiped his mouth.

"Ruth, you might go and give Frank a shout and tell him to put to. We've no time to spare, Rodgers begins to sell on the tick of nine."

"By the margin of fair Zurich's wa-ater," Diana sang: "you'd better eat your breakfast, Ruth, or the eggs'll be cold."

Ruth hurried to the back door. Frank was trudging, up to his ankles in mud, toward the worn cobbles underneath the pump. *Plunk-plunk, plunk-plunk, plunk-plunk. . .* Icy water gushed into his pail; the iron pump-handle sweated with cold.

"They want you to put to, Frank," she called.

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"Righto, Miss Ruth," he shouted back over his shoulder.

These market days, how well she knew them; the ride in the high dogcart jolting down to Lesswardine; the little town with its dingy shops and bankrupt shopkeepers with whom she was expected to gossip about their unimaginable worlds while her father stumped about in his mired leggings or gulped down whiskey over a bargain at the Lamb! It was for this that Diana had confined herself in that prim tailor-made coat, for this that she had risen in the dusk to make her fifty pounds of butter. Diana took a percentage on all dairy produce and paid it into the bank at Lesswardine every Thursday. Nobody, not even John Morgan, knew how much Diana had saved, but everybody talked about it. Someday, Ruth supposed, Diana would marry some red-faced, middle-aged buck of a farmer like George Baggot; and then she would go on making fifty pounds of butter before breakfast for the rest of her life.

By the time Ruth returned to the dining-room Diana had swept the linen table-cloth away, leaving a sombre waste of green chenille with a frozen aspidistra in the middle. They hadn't thought of asking her to drive with them to Lesswardine. They took it for granted that she wouldn't want to go. So much the better!

From behind an aromatic hedge of geraniums that languished in the low window Ruth watched them drive away; the immensely high dogcart, whose wheels had once been painted yellow; Diana, with her Noah's ark silhouette, perched on top; the powerful cob, half cart-horse, with his

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hairy fetlocks; her father, grim and massive in his square felt hat. The mist received them. Mist thickly curdled about the flanks of Castel Ditches, where the Romans had been and now the North Bromwich excavators were at work.

"A romantic occupation," she thought, as she rescued the remains of breakfast from the hands of a strange maid, Diana's latest acquisition, who was gobbling her own in the kitchen. Romantic, but, on a day like this, how comfortless! She shivered. Even the top of Castel Ditches, hidden in mist, could hardly be more comfortless than this damp room which no sun ever penetrated save in the height of summer.

She determined, whatever scandal it might give Diana, to light a fire. She called the maid from the kitchen and stood over her while she filled the grate with kindling sticks of alder, split by the Lancashire cloggers in the previous Autumn. Then she settled down to a lazy morning in front of the blaze. After the strenuous term such ease was a luxury. For reading she chose a volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, the first of a set which her home's romantic associations had induced her to buy in Cheltenham. In the A.D. 211, seventeen hundred years ago, the Emperor Severus had died at York. In those days veritable Romans looked down upon the spot where she was sitting from the rampart of Castel Ditches. What manner of men were they, and what had been their thoughts? She read on, dreamily, scarcely understanding, hypnotized by the rhythm of that heroic prose, as firm and unrelenting as the tread of marching legions.

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The wood fire flared itself away; the coals caught and settled; the closely printed page blurred before her eyes till she was half asleep.

The new maid roused her, calling her name from the door:

"Miss Ruth, Miss Ruth, you're wanted, come quickly!"

"May I come in, Miss Morgan?" another confident voice continued. It was Dr. Hendrie, from Lesswardine, the attendant and friend of the family, whom she had known since her childhood. He came in with a jolly smile on his firm lips, his grey moustache and eyebrows frosted with dew. "I'm glad to find you in," he said. "When did you arrive, and how's Cheltenham?"

As he spoke he gripped her hand with his strong, surgical fingers; but though his question seemed in earnest he did not wait for her reply.

"Look here," he said, "I'm sorry to trouble you people, but this is a matter of urgency. The young fellow who's in charge of the excavations up on the hill is seriously ill. Pleurisy with effusion. The fools have been living under canvas. You realize, of course, that he can't stay there. No conveniences of any kind, and right out of the way in case of an emergency. I should have liked to get him into the cottage hospital, but frankly, as things are, I don't think he'd stand it. I may have to aspirate; he's the kind of chap that might put up an empyema. You don't know what that means: you would if you had one! The point is—you see what I'm driving at?—that I'm going to dump him here. Don't get alarmed. It's merely a temporary measure, a half-

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way house, so to speak. I know your father well enough to be sure that he won't object. Yes, yes, I know he's gone to market; that makes no difference. You and I and the girl can manage between us. I know you're practical. Let's get a move on. Blankets, hot-water bottles, a fire in the spare bed-room. It's a question of the poor beggar's life."

Together they threw themselves into the business of preparing the room. They joked, as they had always done, for to the doctor Ruth was still a child; but beneath Dr. Hendrie's joking lay the core of a clear and masterful purpose; even in details purely domestic his knowledge and forethought put her to shame; in anticipating comfort this grizzled man was keener than a woman.

"D'you think I've never made a bed before?" he laughed. "Two blankets are enough; you don't need to stifle the fellow. Windows wide open. Never mind the mist; the fire will put that right. We're ready just in time; I think I hear them below. You'd better stay here till we bring him up. Be good, and *au revoir!*"

He went. The open windows of the spare room commanded the drive in front of the house. Looking downward from them Ruth saw a slow procession approaching.

It seemed that all the labourers at the excavations had left their work to make the most of the morning's excitement. Six of them solemnly carried a hurdle between them, and, on the hurdle, a figure, covered with a blanket. The doctor's sturdy form appeared in the doorway. The men stood waiting for his instructions.

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"That's right," he said. "This way. There . . . gently does it! Well, Bredon, my dear fellow, how are you feeling?"

Ruth could not hear the invalid's answer. As they entered the house she left her window and stood on the landing. In the hall, at the foot of the stairs the hurdle was lowered. The bearers sighed deeply as they straightened their backs and arms. Dr. Hendrie was speaking:

"Now, Bredon, put your arms round my neck as if you loved me. Nonsense, you're no weight to speak of; next to nothing. We had plenty twice your weight to carry during the damned war. Relax, man, relax! That's better. Now, up we go!"

The workmen stood like sheep at the stair-foot while Hendrie, his strong face flushed, ascended. "Don't try to make it easy for me," he panted. "Relax and leave the rest to me."

He pushed his breathless way past Ruth on the landing and finally deposited his patient on the bed. With vague, uncertain hands, the other pushed the rough blanket from his face. He stared up wonderingly into Ruth's eyes. And Ruth's eyes filled with sudden tears. She could not look at him.

Why? Later, again and again, she asked herself the reason of this strange emotion. Through all the rest of her life she was to remember what she saw. She saw the long face of a young man drawn with pain. A five days' growth of beard gave it a wildish aspect. The lips were full, but

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pale; the line of the mouth peculiarly gentle. Above them a narrow but finely chiselled nose, whose nostrils expanded with each painful inspiration as though the tiniest muscles were concentrated on relieving the body's hunger for air. One cheek was white as death; the other burned with a staring, morbid flush as though it had been slapped. Rat-tails of dank, dark hair were plastered on the white forehead, beneath which two black, myopic pupils regarded her steadfastly with a mixture of wonder and fear: eyes big and bewildered, that stared at her fixedly like those of a frightened animal.

"That's better," Hendrie panted. "That's better. Phew! Now let me introduce you formally. Miss Ruth Morgan, one of my oldest patients: Mr. Bredon . . . Hugh Bredon, isn't it? . . . my latest victim."

He laughed. The sick man hesitated, as if he were pulling together all his resources of precious breath.

"Miss Morgan," he whispered, "I'm deeply grateful . . . It's most . . . charitable of you . . . to . . ."

"We'll take all that as said," the doctor interrupted cheerily. "Now that you're safely here, in tolerable surroundings, I want to have another look at these lungs of yours. No, no, don't go!" He called over his shoulder to Ruth. "I may possibly want you. There's nothing to be shocked about."

Ruth blushed and stayed. The moment seemed to her peculiarly solemn. She saw the doctor, with the ear-pieces of his binaural stethoscope about his neck. He bent over

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Bredon's body, breathing heavily through his moustaches, and undid the buttons of his patient's pyjama jacket. Gently he uncovered the stranger's chest, regarding it intently. The skin was pale and smooth as ivory. She couldn't have believed that a man's skin was as smooth as that. And yet, this wasted, listless body, how many times had she seen it! That pallor of old ivory, that bloodless tone! Descent from the Cross! The pity of all fallen Adonises, all broken Christs, surged up into her mind and filled it with inexplicable awe.

The doctor had laid a blunt finger parallel with the ribs. The patient closed his eyes. With the forefinger of his other hand Hendrie began to percuss. A clear, tympanic note from the clavicle downward, which suddenly muffled and went dull. Dr. Hendrie was murmuring to himself: "That's liver-dullness. Very good. You're clear on that side. Now try to turn over. Gently! Arms round my neck again. That's right . . . excellent!"

Again the sinister percussions. From the shoulder-blade downward the doctor's fingers moved swiftly. Then, doubtfully, they paused. "Exactly," he whispered. "Now, let's see." He put the stethoscope to his ears: "Breathe deeply. Yes, I know it hurts; I'll soon have finished. Yes, very good. Again . . . Now please say 'Ah.' Again . . . Yes, go on saying 'Ah' whenever you feel the stethoscope. H'm . . . Very good. All over."

Gently he turned the patient on his back. He folded his stethoscope and smiled at Ruth. "It might be worse," he said. "Milk, in small quantities: half a cupful every hour,

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alternatively with beef-tea. Diana will know how to make that if you don't. He can drink as much as he likes: weak tea for preference. Keep the room at somewhere about sixty. No thermometer? Of course you haven't: I'll send one, or bring it with me when I call again this evening. I daresay I shall meet your father on the way. Good-bye."

IV

ALL THROUGH the day Ruth kept her station near Bredon's bed. He lay with his eyes closed; he only opened them, each time with a glance of wonder, when she offered him the food that Dr. Hendrie had ordered. Then he would gaze at her curiously, fearfully, and sometimes murmur "Thank you" before he closed them again, and Ruth sat on, in a sort of religious quietude, with the volume of Gibbon open on her lap. She did not read it; she did not even think. Her free imagination had been caught by the idea of the mortal struggle of which Bredon's body was the battlefield, until she began to take part in it, to identify herself with his burning body, his embarrassed lungs, to supplement, with her own forces, his desire to live. Almost impersonally; for still he was a stranger to her: she could only think of him in terms of the pitiful vision that had afflicted her so acutely—the wounded Adonis, the broken Christ, a shadowy incarnation of all human suffering. When the maid came and told her that dinner was ready she shook her head. She had no need for food. To have eaten at that time would

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have been equivalent to the betrayal of a solemn trust, to the withdrawing of her forces in the heat of battle. Only by a mystical concentration of all her spirit's forces could the fight be won.

It was late in the afternoon when the others returned: John Morgan a little blurred with whiskey, as was his wont on market-days: Diana chilled and fretful, for her father's protracted session at the Lamb had kept her kicking her heels for half the day in Lesswardine. When Ruth heard the dogcart clatter into the yard she rose to meet them.

"You met Dr. Hendrie on the way?" she asked anxiously.

They had met no one; the roads were drowned with rain.

They stared at her in amazement as she explained Bredon's arrival.

"But, Ruth," Diana exclaimed indignantly, "you don't mean to tell me that you've taken him *in*?"

"I couldn't do anything else," she said. "How could I? The doctor said he'd take the responsibility. He said distinctly it was a matter of life and death."

"Responsibility indeed! It's all very well to talk like that. Why do we support a cottage hospital? Only three weeks ago your father gave them a subscription. We have no responsibility toward this young man. Life and death! Supposing he were to die; supposing we had a funeral in the house! If he's as bad as that, the drive to Lesswardine wouldn't make much difference. Upon my soul, I can't imagine what you were thinking of!"

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John Morgan, whose ears could only catch the shriller points of Diana's indignation, intervened.

"What's done is done," he said. "You can't blame Ruth. Ruth acted rightly. In a matter like this you've got to go by doctor's orders, and Hendrie's a sound man. Now that the fellow's here, he's got to stay here. The house is big enough. What's up with him?"

"Let's hope it's not infectious," Diana grumbled. "If it's infectious the first thing they'll do'll be to stop our milk."

Ruth disregarded her. "He says it's pleurisy, pleurisy with effusion," she shouted in her father's ear.

John Morgan grunted. "Pleurisy, eh? That's nothing much. Your mother had pleurisy once."

"Pleurisy," Diana repeated scornfully. "I don't know what effusion means and I don't want to. One thing I know, and that is that we shall have the whole house upside down, just when it's been spring-cleaned. We shall have to get another woman in. This new girl has no sense in her head. All the extra work is going to fall on us."

"It needn't fall on *you*, Di," Ruth reminded her.

"It won't, my dear. You can be sure of that. It's your responsibility. No doubt, seeing that he's a man, you'll like to keep him to yourself. Well, well, you're welcome to him. That's all I've got to say."

"Then you needn't go on repeating it," Ruth flamed back at her.

"As long as you don't pretend that you're a martyr and a heroine I won't," Diana assured her.

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Literally, she kept her word. All through the early, acute stages of Bredon's illness, in which he needed attention every hour, Diana bore herself as if the whole business had nothing to do with her. It was Ruth who prepared his food in the farm kitchen, Ruth who lighted his fire and swept his room and devoted herself to the long silent vigils of day and night. John Morgan took the whole matter complacently. It was in accordance with the generous and hospitable tradition of that mountainous border-land to harbour strangers in distress. He contented himself with an occasional interview, over a jug of cider, with Hendrie, who drove up every morning. Diana, perversely, would not even ask how the invalid was. His presence was Ruth's affair. If Ruth were in difficulties, so much the worse for her. Let her cope with them. She deserved it.

And Ruth, through all this period, was scarcely aware of Diana's hostility. In the early stages her mind was too deeply engrossed in the struggle with which she had identified herself, in the task of conserving the force which, mystically, she believed she had power to infuse into Bredon's wasted body, to take count of anything outside the sick man's room. Not one of Diana's bitter innuendoes could pierce her pre-occupation; she was armed against them as a devoted convert is armed against the jeers of infidels.

"You make an ideal nurse," the doctor flattered her. "You've been wasting your time teaching rich men's daughters hockey and lacrosse. You've missed your vocation, Ruth."

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She smiled. She knew that she had found it. In a peculiar way: for she was sure that, under ordinary circumstances, nursing would not have engrossed her. The relationship of Bredon to herself was not that of the normal nurse and invalid. That moment of vision on the day of his arrival, the wave of devotional pity which had risen from the spectacle of his human helplessness, had made her duty a task of mystical piety. She had seen him dying like a flower plucked and discarded, with nothing but blank wonder in his eyes. For her he had been a symbol of all human suffering rather than a person. She had devoted herself to his salvation with an emotion half religious, half maternal, which had soon established itself as the main reason for her detached existence.

Gradually, out of this impersonal relationship, the personality of Hugh Bredon emerged. She glowed with thankfulness and wonder to see it taking shape; she was as proud as if it had never existed before, as if his slowly returning life were her own creation, an emanation from her own body and mind, a physical and spiritual possession in which she would have grudged a share to any other human being . . . even to Dr. Hendrie. She had no other possession in the world. She felt it sacrilegious even to speak of him, he was so sacredly her own.

Diana was quick to notice Ruth's obsession. It annoyed her to feel that her pin-pricks passed unnoticed, her cunning questions unanswered.

"Anyone would think that you were ashamed of him,"

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she said, "the way you keep everything dark about him. I can hear you two talking upstairs thirteen to the dozen. If he's as well as all that, it's about time we others had a look at him."

"The doctor says he must still be kept quiet," Ruth told her. "When visitors are permitted I'll let you know. At present I'm only allowed to read to him. I read for hours."

"That *must* be nice for him," Diana scoffed. "And how important we are! I think it's turned your head completely."

He was her child. It was just like reading aloud to a child. His feebleness enabled her to keep up the pretence of his childishness: and Bredon, to cover the awkward intimacy of their relation, acquiesced. They spoke like lovers in a little language of their own invention. At times he was wilful, and Ruth smilingly severe. At times, when she was reading, his erudition suddenly emerged to shatter their pretence of childishness, to show her that this child of her creation was infinitely more acquainted with the world and its wisdom than herself and teach her an unexpected humility. In the clarity of convalescence his brain was peculiarly bright; his humour teased her; his knowledge asserted an intellectual superiority that filled her with the bewilderment of a hedge-sparrow that has hatched a cuckoo's egg.

This nestling of hers was monstrous and prepotent. His wings were stronger than hers. Soon he would fly away and escape her.

The prospect filled her with a jealous terror. By every human right he was hers, utterly hers. But now that strength

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flowed back into his body, now that his hands no longer needed the guidance of hers, the child became a man; the first man she had ever intimately known.

One morning he insisted on borrowing a razor and shaving his invalid's beard. "When I am shaved," he told her, "you won't know me. I'm ashamed for you to see me like this. I feel like a tramp. You see if it doesn't change the whole of my nature!"

In effect it did. It changed not only his appearance but their whole relationship. Returning to the spare bedroom she found a transformation. The vision of the *Descent from the Cross* was gone, and in its place a pale and handsome stranger, a man of her own age; smooth cheeks, dark, brilliant eyes, a mouth, too beautiful for strength, that smiled at her. She could not look at him. An obstinate wave of colour mounted to her neck, her face.

"Why Ruth," he cried—for long ago they had found their Christian names—"whatever's the matter with you? I've actually made you blush. You, a trained nurse! What have I done to you?"

She tried to hide her blushes, to make excuses for them.

"You gave me such a shock," she said. "I'd no idea that you looked like that."

"Wait till I'm really myself," he told her. "Then I shall give you cause to blush," he joked.

But, from that moment, her naturalness left her. She was shy with him. She even deliberately suppressed the baby language that they had invented, feeling, in some way which

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she dared not define, that its use was dangerous. He tried to joke her out of her seriousness; he persisted in carrying on a one-sided conversation in this fantastic tongue; he teased her with it, knowing that he had lost her, laughing at her awkward silences.

Once, in the middle of one of these ridiculous duels he was astonished to see her hurry to the bedroom door and close it, her eyes bright with anger, her cheeks crimson.

"What is the matter now?" he asked her wonderingly.

At first she would not tell him; but when he persisted she admitted that she had heard a rustle in the passage outside.

"It was my sister," she said. "She was listening. Now, perhaps, you will understand why I object to your talking in that foolish way. It's all good fun for you, but what will she think of me?"

"As if it mattered!" He tried to soothe her. "She could hear for herself that you were as dumb as a doorpost. And anyway I see no harm in it."

But Ruth would not be persuaded. All their happiness was over. The change, for which she knew she should have been thankful, had brought their exalted relationship on to a vulnerable plane. Now that Bredon could fend for himself and read without her help, she avoided him. Yet, when she avoided him, she was miserable. The old, appalling emptiness of Castel Ditches returned.

Dr. Hendrie now visited the farm irregularly. He explained the position to John Morgan. Bredon, he said,

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thanks to Ruth's admirable nursing, had made a good recovery. "But it's important," he continued, "that we shouldn't move him at once. He's got to find his feet. There's no reason now why he shouldn't take his meals downstairs."

John Morgan grunted. "Well, doctor, you know best. We've followed your instructions and we're ready to go on with them. It's no use spoiling the ship, as they say, for a ha'porth of tar."

"You're one of the good old sort, Morgan," the doctor told him. "I wish there were more like you in these days."

His genuine admiration had no effect on John Morgan. He had done his duty to a fellow-man as his fathers had done before him; that was the beginning, that would be the end of his obligation. Not that he liked the type of this refined invalid, who now took his place at the family table. He could not understand his cultivated talk, and made no attempt to do so. He was too old and deaf to adapt himself to strange ways, though a rough tradition of kindness compelled him to offer the guest the best of everything he had.

For Ruth these mealtimes were periods of torture. She was as conscious of Bredon's difference as if she had been responsible for his birth and education; anxious that he should appear to her father and Diana at his best, anxious also that the little idiosyncrasies of John Morgan's table manners should pass unnoticed. Bredon, equally conscious of their difference from himself and of his own indebtedness, gallantly did his best. His efforts made Ruth's heart bleed. In

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an attempt to cover the awkward silences—if such a word could be applied justly to any moment in which his host was eating—he tried to manufacture conversation, speaking, naturally enough, of the discoveries he had made in excavating John Morgan's land; but since John Morgan had never thought of Castel Ditches as anything but a rabbit-warren or an indifferent sheep-walk, that small part of Bredon's conversation which penetrated the veil of deafness fell pathetically flat. John Morgan would answer him indifferently, then change the subject, speaking to Diana of markets, wages, details of farm-management; and Diana, with her bright smile and in the high-pitched voice which she had adapted to his deafness, would answer him. Whenever Bredon attempted to keep his end up Diana looked down her nose or turned a mischievous side-glance on Ruth.

Yet, curiously enough, even Diana was moved by Bredon's presence. In the hard brusque way on which she prided herself, she made overtures toward him. These Bredon rejected, partly because he didn't understand the idiom of her species, and partly because he scented her hostility to Ruth. An invalid had a certain right to be fanciful. He had taken a fancy to Ruth; he didn't fancy Diana. The position was so obvious that Ruth, for her own comfort, felt forced to act as interpreter between them.

"Sometimes you're positively rude to Di," she said. "You don't know how it hurts me."

"But I don't understand her," he protested. "If she spoke

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Greek I could understand her better. With you I know exactly where I am. You are so different from either of them."

"No, I'm not different," she proclaimed hotly. "I'm just the same as they are. "You'll only make them hate you, and I shall have to suffer for it."

She did suffer. Diana, her advances rejected, began to show her jealousy in a studied depreciation of Bredon. Superficially she remained polite and solicitous for his comfort. Behind his back she gave Ruth no peace. Bredon was a prig, a snob, an incubus. Whenever he spoke you could see that he despised you. Considering his position in the house he had no right to put on airs of that kind: insults of which no gentleman would be capable. And Ruth encouraged him in them.

"Of course you pretend that you don't see it," Diana sneered. "Well, that's to be expected, since you're after him. I suppose you think he's a gentleman? Gentleman indeed! What kind of living do you think he makes? Are you really so stupid as to imagine that you can catch him?"

"I imagine nothing of the sort," Ruth protested. "He's natural enough with me. The truth of the matter is you don't understand him."

"Look how you fly up to defend him!" Diana scoffed. "That's where you show your hand, my dear! When you talk like that you might just as well stop pretending. Anyone with one eye can see that you and the doctor between you

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are making fools of us. As long as you *know* that we know it doesn't matter."

It came as a positive relief to Ruth when Dr. Hendrie declared that Bredon was fit to move. "To-morrow," he said. "To-day you'd better take him for a walk. Not too far, mind you, I leave him in your hands. You'd better keep to the level as much as you can."

As soon as the mid-day dinner was over Ruth and Bredon escaped. It was a brilliant May day of blue and white, on which, for the first time, Spring seemed to have scaled and conquered their mountain barrier. The wind blew soft from the south, so gently that it merely served to move into their nostrils the warm, green odour of meadows starred with silvery cuckoo-flower and red-tipped daisies. A world of white and green that imprisoned light; for still, in the hedgerows, snowy sloe-blossoms persisted and the wild cherry-trees flung out their startling bloom against the blackness of woods that seemed still to be sleeping.

Now they walked northward; the sun, behind them, lit, at their feet, a cloth of gold; field after field of vinous-smelling cowslips. So much of youth, so much of hope was in this air, that Bredon, the man who had only lately escaped the shadow of death, and Ruth, who had despaired and suffered with him, were speechless, bemused by its beauty. The chimneys of the farm dipped down behind them and disappeared. They heard no sound but the calling of some distant cuckoo, clear, and yet softened by the gentle

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air. They were more completely alone than ever before; alone, in the haze of gold and winey cowslip odour. Ruth trembled with the strange sweetness of this isolation. Without a word from either, they stopped and drew breath.

When they stood still Ruth saw that Bredon's dark face was flushed by the unusual exertion; his lips were parted, as though he had need of air.

"You are out of breath," she said. "You see we have come too fast."

He laughed; his black eyes laughed at her. "You're such a careful mother-bird," he said, "that you take fright over nothing. This air! I feel as if I'd not filled my lungs for months. It's the first time, for God knows how long, that I've tasted sun in it. I'm a sun-worshipper, Ruth. You are pale, misty, northern. A wood anemone. This is your natural setting . . . this grey country I mean . . . while I—" he hesitated. "I'm dark, I'm different. Something in my blood. It wants a baking in summer like the vines. When the earth cracks with heat . . . that's the moment when I begin to live. A product of the dark races. Iberian. Roman. At least I like to think I'm Roman. Perhaps it's that that made me an archæologist. Those old, hot civilizations always fill me with passion. I feel that I belong to them. Not that I don't love England: I worship every inch of it. But in the English winter I go blanched, like a potato in a cellar. It's only when the sun burns, like this, that I begin to live. Now I am living. You've never seen me alive until this moment."

Ruth smiled, tenderly humouring this burst of egotism.

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"Don't come to life too quickly, Hugh," she warned him.

"Prudent child! No, I won't take your advice. I'm all for life, whenever I get the chance of grasping it. It's so damned short at the best. Now let's go on."

"But rather more slowly," she entreated.

"Give me your hand," he said, "and you shall try to keep me back."

She took his hand. Its grasp was strong and nervous; so different from that of the feeble fingers she had been forced to guide. It seemed, indeed, as if the sun had worked a miracle in him; as if, like the scorched vines of which he had spoken, he drew new strength from it.

They came to the edge of the wood from which the banners of wild cherry bloom had beckoned them and there, like lakes reflecting tropical skies, the sheeted bluebells brought their hearts into their mouths. His fingers tightened on her hand.

"My God, how beautiful!" he cried. "How beautiful! Ruth, they're like your eyes. You're not an anemone. You're a wood of bluebells. Ruth, let me look at them. You mustn't hide them from me like that. You mustn't hide anything from me, my sweet one. You can't pretend that you don't know that I love you?"

She shook her head. She had no words with which to answer him.

"I love you, Ruth, I love you."

"Why should you love me, Hugh?" she whispered.

"Why? Why?" he cried. "Because I'm in love with life."

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And you are life. Its end, its beginning, its whole significance. I owe you my life—Hendrie will tell you as much, if that means anything—but you might just as well have let me die outright as refuse to love me. Oh, Ruth, don't tell me that through all those days and nights you haven't known it?"

"I didn't know it," she told him in solemn truth, "and even now I can't believe it."

"How can I make you believe?" he asked her. He took her in his arms. "Oh, Ruth, can't you feel my heart beating, you silly child? Can't you feel it in my hands, in my lips? Can't you realize how it possesses me, body and soul? Ah, you don't say a word. Your face is cold as ice. You frighten me, Ruth. Can nothing melt you? For God's sake speak to me!"

"What can I say?" she whispered. "What can I say?"

"Only that you love me, my darling. The truth . . . the truth!"

"I love you, Hugh."

"Ruth . . . it's too wonderful. Now that I know it's true I can't believe it. Tell me again, and let me die of happiness."

For answer, with her eyes closed, she kissed his lips.

"Now you should believe," she said. "I've never done that before."

The wood of bluebells was still. The lonely cuckoo had flown away into blue distance. At last Ruth opened her eyes

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and saw, in a confident strange solemnity, the eyes that she had feared, the lips that she had boldly kissed. She feared to look on them no longer; for now, beyond any spite of destiny, it seemed that she had made them her own. A breath of wind ruffled the wood. Petals of the wild cherry-tree which, unperceived, had hung like a fragrant ghost above them, detached themselves and floated downward, falling softly until they were caught in their hair and lay upon their shoulders.

It seemed to her as though, in some baptismal rite, Spring had conferred its blessing on their love.

Dreamily she brushed the petals from Bredon's bowed head. A strange possessive tenderness was in her fingers; yet they were moth-like, timorous, dreading to brush the bloom from new-born wonder.

Next day Hugh Bredon went. There was no pain in their parting. Skies were still roseate with a tremendous after-glow, and Bredon's health was a matter of such importance that neither of them would have admitted any impediment to its restitution. The doctor came over to give him a lift to Lesswardine station, from which Hugh would carry a letter which Hendrie had given him to a specialist in North Bromwich. The instructions were solemn and not to be evaded; for though the acute pleurisy had cleared completely, the organism that caused it had not been isolated, and certain symptoms—mildly disquieting, the doctor cheerfully called them—remained. "A month on the South coast," he proph-

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esied, "will see the end of them; but one can't be too careful in a matter of lungs."

In any case, the lovers decided, they could not have met for long; for now that the Easter holidays were ended Ruth must return to her work in Cheltenham, and Bredon, as soon as his convalescence was over, had still to think of making his living: a matter to which their understanding gave a new importance.

She watched his farewells a little anxiously, relieved by the thought that not even Diana could disallow the frankness of his gratitude. She saw him shake hands with John Morgan and her sister. Their own hands met in the same formal farewell. Her heart leaped with a strange exultation in thinking how little her father or Diana knew of that brief contact's significance. They all stood on the steps watching the doctor's little *de Dion* turn the corner.

"Well, that's the end of *that*," said Diana, with malicious satisfaction. "I don't suppose we shall ever hear of that young gentleman again."

"Eh? Di, what's that?" John Morgan murmured.

"I say, that's a good riddance, dad," she shouted, with a taunting glance at Ruth.

But Ruth was now invulnerable. All through that day she was busy with her packing. On the morning of her departure two letters came from Bredon: one for her father, a written acknowledgment of his hospitality, at which Diana sniffed, and another for herself. Ruth read it in her bedroom while Frank and the dogcart waited. It was her first love-letter.

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"My Own Darling (*he wrote*),

"Since yesterday—was it really yesterday?—I have been living in hell or in Paradise; I really don't know which. When first I turned the corner and lost sight of you, my sweetest, I felt as though I'd left my life behind, that only an empty shell of me was being driven down to Lesswardine. The doctor was just as kind as he could be, but that made no difference. I wasn't in the body that was sitting by him; my real self was just fluttering like some poor ghost round you at Castel Ditches. I wonder if you knew I was there with you? Tell me! Then, when the good Hendrie had stowed me into the train, I began to come round. I think that was the first moment that I realized, soberly and sanely, what had happened, and it nearly killed me. Luckily I was alone in the compartment, because I had to keep on saying: 'She loves me, she loves me, she loves me,' over and over again, aloud, before I could believe it was true. Ruth, is it really true? Because if I've dreamed it, as I sometimes think I must have done, I might just as well be dead and buried at this moment for all that life would mean to me. Tell me—the very moment you get this letter, write and tell me that it's really true, for oh, Ruth, my perfect, my lovely one, if it isn't . . . Here I go saying the same thing over and over again; but, really, my mind is only capable of saying one thing. Hour after hour it goes on saying continually: I love you, I love you, I love you . . . nothing else.

"I must be practical for a moment, because though I'm

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too mad to realize it, important things have happened. Important to us, I mean; that is the only kind of importance that counts. I took the doctor's letter to Sir Arthur Weldon and had two guineas' worth of advice. He gave me a thorough overhauling, and this is his verdict. Pleurisy all right. Lungs fair to cloudy. He X-rayed me: just like being electrocuted. He says there's a little suspicion of something or other on the right side up at the top. Don't, please, be frightened. Nothing to worry about. Only, he says, I ought to go South for a month or so (Cheltenham? I suggested. But he wasn't having any! Just like our luck!) Also he says it's quite mad to think of carrying on the job at Castel Ditches. That would have been an awful blow to me a month ago; now that you won't be there I don't care a damn. He said that, properly speaking, I oughtn't to winter in England. That nearly did for me, because . . . Well, you know why. You haven't forgotten, have you, that I love you?

"And now for the great NEWS. I took old Weldon's report along to the museum and showed it to my chief, the head of the Antiquities Department. He was extraordinarily kind about the work I'd done at Castel Ditches; told me I was a born archæologist (as if I didn't know it!) and that sort of thing. Then, suddenly, absolutely out of the blue, he made me an offer; a job in Egypt, Luxor-Thebes to be exact—where the University has got a digging concession. Not only a job, my darling, but a well-paid job. They have a kind of hostel there to house the staff, and . . . married quarters! It means—but you can see what it means?—it

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means that when I've found my feet there you can come out to me. Heavens, I can scarcely write the words, they mean so much to me!

"Of course I accepted. We shall have plenty of time to think about it. The digging season is over for this year. Hesketh, the chief, suggests that as soon as I'm really fit I should go to London, Paris and Berlin to learn all the Egyptology that I can pick up in the time. That means that we shall not see each other much, but what does it matter, with so much happiness in front of us? Write to me this very instant and tell me that you think all this is as wonderful as I do. Address: Tregaron House, Sidmouth, Devon. I shall have started when you get this letter.

"Take care of your dear self, my precious one. Now close your eyes a moment. I'm going to kiss you. Oh, Ruth, my sweet, I love you. How I love you!

"HUGH."

V

AND EIGHT months passed. Two terms of routine life at Cheltenham, made tolerable, almost made sweet, by the serene confidence that now possessed Ruth's heart. They wrote to each other regularly, twice a week. Out of Breton's letters, which seemed, paradoxically, more real than her most vivid memories of himself, she constructed a new and satisfying image of him. They were engaged. Nobody at Castel Ditches knew; nobody in the world, precisely, but

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themselves; not even Ruth's old college friend, Mildred Graves. In any case at Cheltenham she couldn't have shown the cheap little ring which Hugh had sent her from Sidmouth. The Misses Boyle, the joint headmistresses, did not approve of their staff showing signs of being engaged. They said it put ideas into the girls' heads. What ideas? Ruth wore her ring on a gold chain that had belonged to her mother, round her neck.

They met once, only once, at the beginning of the summer holidays, when she passed through North Bromwich on her way home from Cheltenham. He was waiting on the fogged yellow platform as her Midland train steamed in. She waved to him from the carriage window. In a moment she was in his arms. They kissed. Ruth had the impression that she was being kissed by a stranger; for Bredon, in the flesh, had no correspondence with the man with whom she was in love on paper. At first she was terribly shy of him; it seemed as if they would have to begin all over again. As they lunched in a curtained niche of the Dousita café, she puzzled her head to think in what way he was different. He was terribly thin, to begin with; much thinner than she had imagined. Even his hair was a little thin on the top, with threads of silver in it over the temples. His face was deeply lined, and he wore glasses. Gentle, mild, rather worn, he seemed to her in comparison with the fiery, exalted lover of the cowslip meadows. But his voice was the same, and his lips said that he loved her. She felt that he had been putting on a brave face, deceiving her as to the real state of

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his health. He needed looking after, poor darling. That was her function in life.

When they had finished lunch they had still two hours to spare. At North Bromwich there were no cowslip meadows to make love in, and under the imagined scrutiny of so many strangers she still felt awkward and embarrassed; the very waitress seemed insolent and inquisitive.

"I'll tell you what," he said, "we'll go to the museum."

There, in the dank, sepulchral chambers that housed the collections of Greek and Roman and Egyptian antiquities, Bredon became another man. He seemed to extract an elixir of life from those dead relics. He glowed, he burned, he was transfigured, and most of all when he showed her the additions which he had made to the collection by his digging at Castel Ditches. But Ruth, though she caught fire from his enthusiasm, could not help feeling that her own ignorance isolated her from him; that the appeal of these inanimate shapes had acted on his mind more powerfully than her own presence. The vague thought troubled her so deeply that Hugh himself became conscious of her inattention. He stopped short, suddenly, and asked her if she were not feeling well.

"No, no, go on," she begged him, "I love to listen to you." But deep in her heart she was puzzled and even, inexplicably, jealous. He gazed at her with anxious intentness.

"Ruth, you look tired, my darling," he said. "I believe you've been over-working at Cheltenham. You're not fit to look after yourself. That is the curse of letter-writing. No

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letter ever written tells the real truth. Are you quite sure you're not tired?"

"A little, perhaps," she confessed. "The end of term is always a rush. And isn't this museum rather stuffy?"

He laughed. "Perhaps it is; but I'm so used to museums that I don't notice it. Still, if you feel like that," he added, reluctantly, I suppose we'd better go." He took her arm. "It simply throws me into a panic," he said, "when I feel there's anything wrong with you . . . you, who are so splendidly healthy in everything."

"Oh, please don't worry about me," she laughed. "It's partly the excitement of meeting you. Although I think of you always, I wasn't, somehow, prepared for it. And I'm a little anxious too, with far more reason than you. You look so dreadfully thin, Hugh darling, and you haven't lost your cough yet."

He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Oh, that . . . that's nothing. It's just the way I'm built. Weldon's quite satisfied. That's good enough for me. Whatever can you expect in this foul climate? In three months' time I shall be off to Egypt, into the sun. And then, soon after, you will be able to look after me, and satisfy yourself, if you consider it necessary."

Ruth left the museum with a shudder of relief. When he began to speak of the Egyptian adventure a flame less sinister enlivened him. He seemed so full of life and hope that she was able to put to flight all her apprehensiveness. She walked the barren asphalt pavements of North Bromwich

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with her arm in his, recapturing gratefully, a little of the vernal ecstasy that they had lost; and when he had put her into the train for Shrewsbury and kissed her good-bye, she had become herself again.

In the middle of the Christmas holidays Hugh's momentous letter came to Castel Ditches. Diana took it from the postman's hands, as by right of seniority, and stared curiously at the Egyptian stamp. Diana, Ruth knew, would have given her eyes to see inside it.

"Egypt. That's yours," she said. "The young man's very faithful. I suppose, by now you've given up the idea that he'll ever marry you." She sorted the other letters; all of them were bills in oblong buff envelopes addressed to John Morgan; no love-letters from Egypt or anywhere else for Diana. "If you can tear yourself away from your correspondence, Ruth," she went on, "you might give me a hand with the butter."

For more than an hour the sisters worked together in silence. As soon as she could excuse herself Ruth escaped and hurried up to her bedroom with Hugh's letter. All was well, he told her; the quarters at Thebes were waiting for them; a boat, the *Malua*, was sailing from Marseilles on January 21; if she could catch it, he would try to meet her at Port Said. Ruth sat there for a long time, watching the sad clouds trailing out of Wales, their fleeces tangled in the woods like sheep's wool in ragged hedges. She felt it her duty to think before making up her mind: though, actually, her mind was made up already. Then she wrote a formal confirmation of

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the resignation that she had given to the Misses Boyle at Cheltenham, and later, dodging Diana's curiosity, walked in, five wintry miles, to Lesswardine and cabled Hugh her answer:

Sailing Malua Port Said January Twenty-First.

When she had paid for her ten words she stood at the counter, listening, while the village post-mistress tapped them over the wires. She listened until they were gone and had escaped her for ever, those broken jets of electric fluid that were letters, words, thoughts; and when it was all over, and she turned away, it seemed to her as if, with them, some virtue had gone out of her, leaving her different from what she had been five minutes before.

Evening fell bleak and early. On the way home she was wondering how she should break the news to them at Castel Ditches. Three miles out of Lesswardine she heard the leisurely rhythm of a big horse trotting slowly behind her. It was the black cob bringing back John Morgan from market. As he came abreast of her he recognised her and pulled up.

"That you, Ruth?" he called. "Jump up! Whao, then, you brute, keep steady! Good boy, good boy!" Where had she been at this time of day, he asked her. To Lesswardine, to post a letter, she told him. Here was her chance to confess everything without Diana putting a spoke in the wheel; but, all of a sudden, Ruth went shy, and couldn't breathe a word. There was no need for speech, since the fumes of the

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last two whiskies were still dancing in the old man's mind, and made him do enough talking for two. It was when he drove home like this, a little "market-peart," that this hard man became most nearly human. He pinched her arm with an unusual, privileged familiarity; but there was hot blood and violence a little way beneath his friendliness. She was easier with him in his habitual mood, suppressed and cold. Fearing to tempt Providence, she was silent.

But later in the evening, after supper, when he had snored for an hour, Ruth took her courage in both hands and broke her news to them.

"Hugh Bredon has asked me to go to Egypt and marry him," she said. "I shall start from here on the 18th."

Diana blushed. Her eyes blinked; her lips were twisted, but stopped short of speech. Ruth saw her father's eyes, pale blue, like a Norseman's, staring at her above his white fringe of whisker. He grunted at her over his lifted mug of cider. He had grunted in exactly the same way when she announced her intention of taking up a gymnastic training. He hated change, movement, initiative, and grudged it, particularly in his own children; but that which he was ready to restrain by grudging he was too proud to forbid.

"Huh, I suppose you know what you're doing," he said.

"Of course I know what I'm doing, Dad," Ruth answered, with a courage that Diana's shocked silence inspired. He said no more; yet later, when she remembered his oracular remark, she realised the wisdom of experience that lay beneath it, and wondered if she really did. Oh yes, and yes, and yes,

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a thousand times, she told herself. It shamed her to think that she had doubted for one moment. That doubt debased her to the level of these cold, hard-headed people, who were incapable of anything so generous as passion, who weighed the worth of love as they would gauge the weight of a bullock at a stock-sale, and distrusted or despised all human beings that did not conform to their own material mould. Whatever happened, she told herself, neither she nor Hugh could ever be like them; whatever she said they would not understand. But even so, she feared the criticism of those blue eyes that seemed ill-omened and far-seeing. Even when he kissed her good-night John Morgan made no further comment.

"I think you must be crazy," Diana told her later, "going to an outlandish place like Egypt to a man whom you haven't seen for twelve months. Why, even apart from the question of his health, it's dangerous. By the time you get there he'll probably have changed his mind. *I* wouldn't take the risk, I can tell you!"

Ruth smiled. In all her life Diana had taken no risk; she had not even had the chance of taking one. All Diana's life was governed by prudent calculations. For this reason, if for no other, she was condemned to see for ever the weathering line of rampart on Castel Ditches that dominated their narrow life; to watch the same sad clouds come trailing out of Wales; to hear, day after day, week after week, the same dull, canny talk of money and stock and tilth. Diana was contented, or, at least, pretended to be so; but to Ruth this

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maimed existence was a death in life. There was no beauty in it, no colour, no aspiration. Beneath it her eager, palpitating spirit lay crushed and frozen. Now her heart fluttered with the wings of an uncaged bird; yet, like a bird inured to captivity, she was still too bewildered to fly. So that when she came to pack the trousseau which she had accumulated in secret, under Diana's jealous, cynical eyes, her liberty constrained and embarrassed her, and its contrast with Diana's fixed and wilful loneliness was so poignant that there was no joy in it.

PART TWO



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I

THE MARSEILLES express was crowded from end to end; but Mildred Graves, who had met her in Paris, swept the platform like a strong-winged sparrow-hawk, and clutched in her talons a *controlleur*, in a red hat, who assured them that another coach would soon be attached. It came in smoothly out of some sulphurous limbo: two dappled horses straining at its chains with arched necks. As yet there was no light in it; but when Ruth had found her corner seat, she and Mildred sat on in the dark, talking of places and people whom they had known together.

Suddenly the lights went on, and, at the same moment, a broad-shouldered shadow appeared in the carriage doorway. It was that of a tall man, his figure made shapeless by a long dark overcoat. From the step he took one glance at Ruth and Mildred, then, past them, at the empty corners beyond. He spoke to his porter rapidly in a language that Ruth imagined to be perfect French. The porter was staggering under the load of luggage, his back bowed beneath the weight of his strap, his forehead wrinkled, his face congested with strain; but when the two portmanteaux came into their owner's hands they seemed to change their weight, so lightly did he swing

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them to the rack that creaked above Ruth's head. He tipped the porter, and then, without further interest in his luggage, began to pace the platform in his long coat.

Naturally enough he had not spoken a word to Ruth or Mildred; and yet the mere fact of his incursion shattered the intimacy of their talk. On the whole she was not sorry, for Mildred had begun to catechize her on the subject of Hugh, and the somewhat scornful air with which she had received Ruth's confidences over their dinner in a plush-seated restaurant off the *Boulevard des Italiens* had made her sensitive. Somehow, in the light of Mildred's shrewd questionings, Hugh's figure and the details of their love-affair seemed less romantic than she would have wished them to appear.

"I don't much like the look of your travelling companion," Mildred said. "Would you like me to see if there's another empty compartment?"

Ruth laughed. "No, no. Some one else is bound to get in. It would look so pointed to change at once. What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing. I don't know that there's anything wrong with him," Mildred confessed.

"Mildred, how funny you are!" Ruth exclaimed.

"Yes, I suppose I *am* funny. I often have feelings . . . intuitions of that kind. I can't explain them, and generally they're unjustifiable. I shouldn't mind a bit myself; but somehow I felt that you . . ."

Ruth smiled at her perplexity. "Don't worry about *me*, my

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dear; I'm not so tender as all that. Besides, I'm *hors concours*. I suppose he's French?"

"No, I don't think so. He's not Parisian, anyway. Probably, I should think, he's Belgian."

"Congo atrocities?" Ruth laughed. "You, of all people, Mildred, to be so apprehensive and mysterious. What is it? Celtic second-sight?"

Mildred was staring fixedly at the heavy luggage on the rack and did not answer her. "I want to look at his labels," she said in a whisper; "but I simply daren't. He's taking stock of us from the platform all the time. If I could just make out the initials on that bag. *H* . . . Yes, the first is *H*; that's clear enough. Then . . . yes, it's *B*. How very extraordinary! That must be what was worrying me subconsciously. *H. B.* Hugh Bredon. Are you quite sure," she mocked, "that this isn't really Hugh who's come to meet you?"

They laughed together. "If you had tried to find an opposite for Hugh," Ruth said, "you couldn't have hit on one more complete. In any case, here comes our salvation."

It came in the flustered shape of a red-faced Norman sister, who swept her voluminous skirts past Ruth's knees, plumped herself down in the middle of the opposite seat and began to finger her rosary abstractedly, contemplating heaven knew what through the peaceful circular lenses of her spectacles.

"At any rate, I'm sufficiently protected now," Ruth said. Mildred agreed. She was a Catholic herself.

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A collector thrust his head inside and hurriedly demanded their tickets. The wail of a trumpet was heard on the long platform; voices were raised in final joking good-byes.

"I must go, my child," said Mildred. She kissed Ruth swiftly. "Don't forget that you've promised to let me know what happens."

"You sound so anxious, Mildred, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. No, really nothing. Good-bye, my dear. Take care of yourself."

The train was beginning to move. Mildred walked beside the open doorway, gradually dropping behind. Inspectors were shouting to the people to keep clear. Mildred smiled, waved her hand, with all the pathetic helplessness of platform farewells, and Ruth, smiling with equal piteousness, waved back to her. She had forgotten all about her travelling companion until his long fingers clutched the doorpost and, as he swung himself into the compartment, his dark-coated figure swept between her and her friend.

The train ran steadily south-west along the valley of the Seine. It was a relief to Ruth to feel that she was moving once more toward a definite objective; that the magic hidden in the yellow book of tickets, gripping her like some trolley fastened to an endless cable, had set her travelling on her way again.

Now and again, as if to remind her of her helplessness the jolting shook her, as a dog shakes a rat in its teeth, she saw it shake the nun, who had fallen asleep sitting upright

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over her rosary. "A quiet mind," Ruth thought, "I wish I could sleep as easily!"

The three hours' halt in Paris had been unsettling. Looking forward to her meeting with Mildred she hadn't expected to find her in so unenthusiastic a mood. That was the eternal risk of encountering old friends. Physically, and in all superficial aspects, Mildred was the same as ever. Spiritually, they were strangers. "Mildred has changed," she thought, "and I, naturally enough, have changed as much as Mildred." But that, in the case of friends as intimate as they had been, could hardly explain the startling lack of sympathy with which Mildred had listened to her account of Hugh. If she had resented the criticisms of Diana, who knew Hugh, she had far more right to resent those of Mildred, who did not. It was ridiculous for a stranger to appear so doubtful, so uneasy. She could not account for it; unless, perhaps, some twinge of lonely jealousy were at the bottom of it.

What right had Mildred to judge? All that she knew of Hugh she had heard from Ruth's own lips: in which case nobody but Ruth herself was to blame for the impression. "I must have given her," she thought, "a picture of ourselves that was open to false interpretations." But that, again, was ridiculous. She had spoken of Hugh as she felt of him, with the completest candour and openness of heart, more freely than she had ever spoken before to any living soul. How could she have failed to make her position clear? Yes, Mildred had changed. She had grown harder, more cynical. Beneath her brightness Ruth saw the bitter envy of spinster-

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hood declaring itself. Poor Mildred, earning her lonely livelihood in this alien city, would never know the rapture of an adventure like this. Small wonder that she was forced to be critical! Yet, these forebodings . . . ?

There had always been something a little uncanny about Mildred's intuitions. Even in those infinitely distant college days they used to joke about them, feeling, beneath their joking, a certain degree of respect. That Celtic second-sight of hers. Could it be possible that Mildred, who still loved her and was her friend, saw something sinister in the act of her departure? That was nonsensical and superstitious. How Hugh would laugh at the idea! And yet, and yet . . . Why had this veiled apprehensiveness of Mildred's power to chill her heart?

To convince herself of its ridiculousness she summoned the evidence of its last phase; the wildly illogical suggestion that she should change her compartment to avoid travelling with the Belgian in the corner. There lay a final proof of Mildred's foolishness. More innocuous travelling companion she had never seen. To encourage herself she surveyed him closely over the screen of the unread fashion-paper which Mildred had bought for her on the platform. She saw him, buried in his corner, at the opposite end of the carriage, his body concealed by the long overcoat, his eyes intent upon a book that he held before him, a thick volume, close-printed, that looked like some scientific treatise.

By what she remembered of his appearance and by the bulge of his knees beneath the overcoat's wrappings, she

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knew that he was a big man. His body gave the impression of something reserved and powerful under the coat's folds. She watched the hands that turned the pages of his book. Their form, their movements, fascinated her; she couldn't imagine why. These hands were large and sunburnt, with a heavily muscled breadth of palm which carried the textbook easily, as if it had no weight. The fingers that turned the pages were long and brown as well: instruments of strength and delicacy and precision all together. There was no tremor in them but that communicated by the steady rhythm of the pulse inside. Strong, without brutality, she thought, as she saw the overhead light reflected in polished nails. She didn't want to gaze too long at those firm instruments of precision; their leisurely movements vaguely troubled her, as, it is said, the slow swaying of a cobra's crest entrances its victim. Their air of supple efficiency frightened her. No—frightened was too strong a word. Only, in such hands as those, she felt, her own strength would be helpless. She compared them, instinctively, with Hugh's sensitive fingers. She had been talking to Mildred—hadn't she?—about Hugh's long fingers.

Suddenly the traveller laid the book on his knees and closed his eyes. Now she could study his face without fear of detection. A face, she thought, fit to control those hands, yet saved from brutality by the same cleanness of design. He seemed a younger man than, in the first impression of height and angularity, she had imagined. The closed eyes, deep-set, and wide as her own, were sheltered by heavy brows and an unwrinkled forehead. A mass of hair, close-cropped and stub-

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born, was brushed across it, unwillingly, it seemed. Its colour was brown, something between her own and Hugh's. The eyes, if once he opened them, should be blue, she thought: and yet the dark bloom of a vigorous beard showed on his shaven cheeks and chin. Those cheeks were high, with prominent, craggy malars enclosing the deep orbits. The chin was firm. Even in repose he carried it as though his teeth were set, determinedly. And yet the mouth, whose lips were neither thin nor full, was moulded to a line in which there was no sombreness. A red, courageous, contented mouth; not hard and cynical, as was John Morgan's, nor tender, with the classic sweetness that she adored in Hugh's. Something betwixt and between the mouths of the two men whom she knew best; not gentle, but refined; not solemn, but serious; not cruel, but truth-speaking—she would have sworn it—not insolent, but bold. The upper lip, she decided, was much too long for beauty; the nose too roughly sculptured; the nostrils heavy, and too wide. By any criterion of artistic perfection the face was not a handsome one. Compared with Hugh's . . .

Why should her brain persist in making these detestable comparisons? They didn't, she assured herself quickly, imply any criticism of Hugh. It was even right and natural that Hugh's should be the standard by which she judged all other men's faces. Then, that ridiculous coincidence: Hugh's initials stamped upon the stranger's label-smothered portmanteau. Evidently he was a man who had travelled much and seen the world; you didn't often see labels like those

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in carriages on the Teme Valley Railway. *H. B.* Yes, it was queer, as Mildred had remarked. That was sufficient excuse for her interest; it explained why Hugh was so intimately mixed up with her thoughts of this stranger. There was a girl—how these names vanished!—a girl at whom Mildred and she used to laugh in their college days, a girl who professed herself a mystic, a Buddhist, a theosophist. She used to say that one's name was a part of one; that people with the same names, even the same initials, had something else mystically in common with each other, like people born with identical horoscopes. *H. B.* . . . If this were even partially true, then surely. . . . What rubbish! How wild were all these ideas that ran through her brain to-night! Tiredness, excitement. . . . She was so tired, so sleepy, so stupefied by the train's unceasing roar.

Yet, all the same, as her mind dwelt drowsily on her fellow traveller, she couldn't help associating him with the idea of Hugh. Hugh's name engrafted on another's body. Bodies and names, fluctuating, interchangeable; changing from one to the other like whirling molecules, atoms, electrons torn from their orbits to accomplish new chemical combinations. They changed so rapidly that she could hardly keep pace with them. If her attention wandered just one moment it would be impossible to distinguish between them. It was so difficult to concentrate with this continual roaring in her ears. Supposing that, in a moment of inattention, the other took possession of Hugh's body without her knowing what had happened. She ought to warn him of his danger. How could

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she make herself heard through all this uproar? What use to call to a Hugh that was not really Hugh; only an amorphous something spinning in space? Yet she did call to him, and suddenly, as by a miracle, found herself in his arms. "I'm frightened, Hugh," she whispered, "Hold me; don't let me go!" His arms embraced her with an unfamiliar violence. His hands closed powerfully on her helpless throat. They were not Hugh's hands; they were large and brown and strong as steel. Her brain whirled. The devilish metamorphosis was complete. This was not Hugh. In her panic she had taken refuge in the stranger's arms. His physical prepotence overwhelmed her; the brown hands enveloped and took possession; the unknown lips were pressed on her mouth. All power of resistance faded away from her; her limbs were no longer her own. She was frozen, helpless, as in the grip of a nightmare; she could not resist its strength; she was conquered; she yielded. Her heart stopped; she died of the intolerable surprise and shame. Vaguely, from the remoter distance of her mind a voice called: "Wake, wake! You must force yourself to wake; you are only dreaming."

She struggled. In her brain the roar of a wild wind gathered and flung her forward into bewildered consciousness. The express was whirling them over the escarpment of the Côte d'Or down, down into Dijon; the carriage swayed like a ship in a beam sea. As she awoke she must have cried out, without knowing, and awakened him; for when she opened her eyes the eyes of her fellow-traveller were fixed on her: blue and keen, with the steely sharpness of a surgical in-

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strument, they pierced her. She felt herself red and breathless; she felt that an apology, an explanation was needed: but when her flustered mind sought for words, she could find none but English, which he wouldn't understand, and, in a moment, he closed his eyes again and she was thankful for the respite.

Now she was wide awake. Something unusual in the compartment; something missing. The seat which the sister had occupied when they left Paris was empty. No doubt she had left the train while Ruth slept, at Sens or at Laroche. How Mildred would laugh!

Crouched in her corner Ruth lay quiet, still dazed and shaken by the reality of that spectral embrace. She tried to put it out of her mind, but still its memory pursued her. Her heart was tremulous and sick with shame. No such experience had ever visited her before. She could not understand it; she could only explain it by some unsuspected looseness and disloyalty in herself. She, who had prided herself on her rigid prudishness; she, at whose exaggerated delicacy Mildred had been smiling only a few hours before! At least, she thanked heaven, the shameful secret was her own. None other would ever know of it, and, least of all, the sharer of her secret. Probably, when once the train had reached Marseilles, she would never see him again. She took what comfort she could from this fortunate circumstance; for the impression remained so deeply rooted in her mind that she knew she could not face him without a blush.

Gradually she fell asleep again and, this time, no dream

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troubled her. When she awoke again to the train's roaring, a bar of cold white light escaped from the lower edge of the lowered blind. Her Belgian still slept serenely with his mouth closed; but, though she was no longer as frightened as when she had woken in the night, prudence constrained her not to look at him. She lifted the blind an inch or two and wiped the steam from the window. Grey-green and endless the plain of Provence stretched away from her, with little hills clothed in a sober mantle of stunted olives, between which the stuccoed walls of humble farm-steads shone coldly. The sky was soft and white, concealing a concentration of sunlight in the upper air. An even, unflattering illumination, that showed, in the pocket-mirror in which she stealthily surveyed herself, the smutty pallor of a night-traveller's face. It was fortunate, she felt, that the Belgian was still asleep. "If I'd been looking like this," she thought, whimsically, soberly, "he wouldn't have kissed me, even in a dream."

She moved quietly into the corridor to make her toilet as best she could in the malodorous lavatory; the water in the basin swayed sickeningly above its sediment of smuts. When she returned to their compartment, relatively refreshed, she found it empty. The blinds had been raised, the window was open, the Belgian had disappeared on the same errand, leaving his belongings piled neatly in the corner which he had occupied.

At first she was too thankful at finding herself alone to think of anything else. Already the Provençal sky, swept clean by mistral, was clearing to a pellucid blue. The sober,

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tufted olives became bronzed, then golden; the white walls of farmsteads shone as though they had been newly scoured to meet the brilliance of day. The distances grew clear. Out of the Winter of Castel Ditches she had been transported into Spring; not Spring as she knew it in England, the Spring in which every blade and leaf and bare bough seem throbbing with active or potential life, but rather a static, suspended state, sufficient in its own unchanging beauty. She remembered a phrase of Hugh's; how he had spoken of the eternal springtime of Greek poetry. Yes, that was it; and by a swift association of ideas two lines of Keats's Ode came singing through her mind:

"Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu . . ."

If only Hugh had been with her to share it. Dear Hugh! However much this golden morning thrilled her, it would have meant more to him. She gazed and gazed, transported by the morbidly keen perception that often follows a disturbed or sleepless night. Before that advancing flood of golden day-break the memory of her dream, which had clung to her mind like chill, reluctant wreaths of mist, dissolved and disappeared. The idea of encountering her fellow-traveller, the sharer of that disgraceful incident, no longer frightened her; and, indeed, she need not have been frightened in any case; for when he had finished his toilet, he hung on in the corridor smoking tobacco that had a pungent and unfamiliar smell which the in-blowing draught carried through the com-

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partment and out at her window. He took no heed of her. Except in the imagination of her nightmare he had never heeded her. He seemed as absorbed as was Ruth herself in the green undulations of the *Bouches du Rhône*, through which the express now whirled them with a renewal of zest, as though it had scented the sea that was its journey's end.

That sea of fable leapt suddenly into sight through a gap in the coastal hills, its cold and crystalline surface, crisped by the offshore wind; a flock of fishing boats, with lateen sails, leaned over it, like gulls come to rest. It vanished. In another gap a forest of factory chimney-stacks appeared. Mountains of Jurassic limestone, as white and sterile as desert-bleached bones, reared their fantastic summits on the left. The gilt statue of *Notre Dame de la Garde* rose, glinting in the sun. People began to lift down their luggage and crowd into the corridor. Out of their foreign babel Ruth managed to dissociate the word *Marseilles*. The Belgian knocked out his pipe and returned to the compartment. He stowed away his text-book in a handbag and pulled on his long overcoat. Ruth, from her corner, watched him demurely and quite undisturbed as he lugged down his heavy baggage from the rack and stowed it ready for arrival in the corridor.

"He looks innocent enough now," she thought. "Mildred's *Chianti* must have been stronger than I imagined. In any case I shall never see him again.

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II

INDEED, THE excitement of her sudden transference from the station to the *Malua* through the dust and squalor of the Western fringes of Marseilles was sufficient to banish all other preoccupations from her mind. Unsustained by the fluent guidance of Mildred, who had piloted her so slickly through Paris, she felt herself lamentably at the mercy of the foreign porter and cabman into whose hands she fell. Both were so fiercely meridional, so darkly and vividly different from herself beneath their smiling faces, that it gave her a feeling of relief to see the *Malua's* parti-coloured house-flag fluttering above her black hull and buff deckhouses; for though, from the high fo'c'sle, the black and sinister faces of a lascar crew stared down at her, the quartermaster, who kept the gangway and saw her aboard, was as indubitably English as a rich cockney accent could make him. Moving aft to the second-class deck she felt that actually, rather than by the terms of any legal conventions, she was on English soil again.

How very English it was she hardly realized until she had dressed for dinner and entered the lounge that evening. The narrow oblong was divided between little groups of people, all in evening dress and talking familiarly at the top of their voices—the passengers who had embarked at London—and other solitary, diffident units, who, like herself had joined the ship at Marseilles. The first regarded the second, herself

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included, with a watchful and insolent curiosity, as if they were a procession of mannequins to be appraised entirely by externals; the second hung about in a strained self-consciousness under this scrutiny, looking and feeling like questionable intruders, aware that every movement or sound that they made was being observed and catalogued.

A bugle on the deck above cheerfully sounded the officers' mess-call. The London passengers, as by unquestioned right of precedence, swarmed down the stairways into the saloon. Ruth, in her modest pale blue dinner-dress, followed among the mass of pariahs from Marseilles. She had not realised that it was necessary to book her seat at table. Indian stewards, white-gowned, red-banded, had fluttered out with the soup like a flight of brilliant birds before the head-waiter found her a place. Fortunately for her composure she had only one neighbour, a blowsy, youngish woman whose evening-dress she recognized at once as one which she had seen suspended from the bunk above her own. This lady, with equally acute observation, apparently realized that Ruth was sharing her cabin.

As soon as she had satisfied the cravings of an appetite which Ruth, already uncomfortably conscious of the *Malua's* motion, could not hope to emulate, she opened conversation.

"I think we're cabin-mates," she said. "I do hope you're a good sailor."

Ruth hoped so too. Unfortunately, for lack of experience, she couldn't be sure.

"Because," said her plump neighbour, "if you aren't, it is

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so unpleasant, isn't it? All the way round from Tilbury you see, I've had the cabin to myself. That is the worst of stopping and taking on people at Marseilles; it's like beginning all over again. However, we shall have to make the best of it. I hope you don't stay up very late?"

"This evening, certainly not," Ruth told her. "You see I sat up all night in a second class railway carriage."

"How sensible!" her neighbour breathed charitably; yet Ruth was vaguely aware that she had lost caste by travelling second. "All the nicest people travel second in these days," her neighbour added. "I wouldn't travel first on these boats for a lakh of rupees. The first is crammed with snobs and nouveaux riches and wealthy box-wallahs."

"Box-wallahs?" Ruth repeated.

"People in trade," Mrs. Etherington-Smith replied—she had already made it clear that her husband (absent) was a police officer in the United Provinces. "I can see," she said, "that you have never been in India. And you're not going out now? Only to Egypt? Then perhaps I shall have the cabin to myself after Port Said. However nice people are, it's a relief to be alone, isn't it?"

The welcome news that Ruth was disembarking at Port Said permitted her neighbour to take coffee with her in the lounge after dinner.

"You'll think I've been inquisitive," she said, "only if you knew how careful we officials have to be"—she spoke as if she were personally responsible for the policeing of the United Provinces—"you'd realize that it is necessary. It

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isn't snobbishness; I don't think Anglo-Indians are ever *that*; only, you understand, it's so easy to make acquaintances on board ship and so difficult to drop them again in India, where you simply *must* if they aren't people of your own class. Nobody can say *I'm* narrow, but look what happened three years ago, on this very ship! I came out, just as it might be with yourself, my dear Miss Morgan, in the same cabin with such a charming girl; so quiet, and respectful, and unobtrusive, I quite took to her and mothered her. I *had* to mother her; there was a boy in the Thirtieth Baluchis after her. Would you believe it? A week later, in Bombay, I happened to go into Whiteway and Laidlaw's Store, and this very girl served me with a pair of white lisle stockings! It was most awkward. We'd been quite intimate, and I'd told her lots of little things about Harry that you wouldn't dream of mentioning to a girl of that class. You see how careful one has to be?"

Ruth saw, as well, that Mrs. Etherington-Smith—the hyphen had been underlined—was really dying to know why she was going to Egypt. That night, as the *Malua* lifted to a head-swell dying in the gulf of Lyons, and, from her upper berth, she watched her companion's figure emerge from the restrictions of its stays, she gratified the lady's persistent curiosity by telling her.

"How very interesting!" said Mrs. Etherington-Smith and was silent. But later, in defiance of Ruth's tiredness, she went on talking in the dark from the berth below, encouraged by her knowledge of Ruth's relative respectability and early

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departure to make her the repository of those marital confidences which, three years ago, she had imprudently bestowed upon the girl from Whiteway's. Anything that related to station-politics or the relations of the sexes, of which station-politics seemed to be mainly composed, was food for Mrs. Etherington-Smith's intelligence. Out of her vast experience of these matters she was ready to give advice.

"Do you realize," she warned Ruth seriously, "that you are doing one of the most risky things that any girl can possibly do, going overseas to marry a man whom you haven't seen for a year? You may laugh at me as much as you like, my dear child, but I haven't lived in India for fifteen years without getting to know what human nature is. Time after time I've seen affairs like yours end in disaster. You girls just meet a man at home on leave with plenty of money to spend, and fall in love with him and come sailing out gaily to marry him, often without the very least idea of what you're in for. Of course I don't know Egypt; but I imagine it's very like India with a cooler climate. Now, tell me, have you any idea of your fiancé's social position?"

Ruth laughed. The question had never occurred to her.

"But it should, it *should*! In England these things don't matter so much. The conditions are different. But in hot countries"—why in hot countries? Ruth wondered—"they're of vital importance. A woman takes her position from her husband; and unless her husband belongs to the official class, her life is going to be one long misery. Of course I don't know what standing an archæologist has in Egypt. In India,

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I assure you, a university professor doesn't count for much. . . ."

"But that," she went on, "is only one side of the danger. You must be prepared for surprises. In out-of-the-way stations—I've no idea where Luxor is—bachelors are often in the habit of leading very immoral lives. Of course, in your case, I make no insinuations. But there it is; I suppose it's the heat that does it; and you ought to be prepared. Oh, yes, you may laugh; but, unless you're careful, you're no safer than he is. There's many an accident that happens between Aden and Bombay. Of course—how stupid of me!—you're leaving at Port Said. Only, if you'll take my earnest advice, you won't see too much of the young men on board. Remember, they're quite ready to amuse themselves at your expense. If you're in any difficulty you can always come to me. Don't thank me"—Ruth hadn't thanked her—"I always feel a responsibility toward people with less experience than myself. Why, five years ago, it was on the *Macedonia*, there was a girl named—really this tropical memory is too terrible!—well, never mind her name. Grace something or other. I remember she was going out to marry some doctor-man in Singapore. When we passed Suez I knew that things were going wrong. . . . A major in the Fortieth Pathans . . . a married man. . . . The Red Sea. . . . Awful. . . . Boat-deck. . . . 'Grace,' I said . . ."

Her monotonous voice died away into the vaster monotony of thudding engines and streaming sea; the streaming sea washed over it and submerged it, the rhythm of engines was

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blended with that of Ruth's slowly-beating heart. She fell asleep.

The stewardess awakened her, putting a cup of muddy tea on the tray at the side of her berth. Her companion still snored serenely in the bunk below. "Your bath, miss. In five minutes. If you don't take it now, you'll miss your turn."

Ruth swallowed the tea, still less than half-awake, and put on her cap and dressing wrap. Through the spray-bleared port-hole she saw a deep blue Corsican sea leaping and sparkling in the sun. The *Malua* still rose and wallowed in its waves; but Ruth was so rested and restored that now her spirit rejoiced in the ship's buoyant motion. How sweet, how soft, how clean was this air of the Middle Sea; how vigorous, invigorating, the hot salt water, frothing from capacious faucets to settle, tinged with blue, into the white-glazed bath!

While she bathed in it, cleansing body and soul, she sang to herself and thought of Mrs. Etherington-Smith. "*I am not snobbish; I don't think people can say that Anglo-Indians are ever that,*" she repeated, blissfully. "*I am not narrow . . . really this tropical memory is too terrible!*" She laughed out loud at Mrs. Etherington-Smith and her warnings. If only that good lady knew how little they meant to her!

Refreshed, revived, she slipped out into the alley-way. A tall figure in a gown of bath-towelling impeded her passage and flattened himself against the bulkhead to let her

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pass. Out of ordinary politeness she modestly raised her eyes to thank him, and found herself gazing into those of the Belgian of the Paris-Marseilles express. He smiled acknowledgment of her excuse, disclosing, by his smile, an even set of strong white teeth. He did not speak a word, yet in his glance, there seemed to her something more than a mere recognition. It was confident, taunting, almost possessive. It seemed to say to her—perhaps the memory of her nightmare made her apprehensive—"So here we are again. You thought you'd seen the last of me, didn't you? My dear girl, you never made a greater mistake in your life!"

The discovery of his presence on board the *Malua*, that cold reminder of an incident which she wished to forget, disturbed her so profoundly that all the zest of the morning fell away from her. At breakfast she found herself no longer listening to the chatter of her cabin-mate; her eyes were wandering up and down the long tables of the saloon, expecting, half dreading to discover the Belgian's whereabouts.

"I'm afraid you're not feeling well," said Mrs. Etherington-Smith, annoyed by her inattention, foreseeing the discomfort of a sea-sick cabin. "If you'll take my advice as that of an old traveller you'll go on deck at once. Fresh air's the great point. You can put your chair close to mine," she added, as a signal concession, "and then we can have a little chat."

By "a little chat" Ruth knew she meant a morning of chatter; but even the protection of this garrulous company was better than none. When breakfast was over they arranged

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their chairs side by side on the promenade deck. Ruth sat with Maspero's study of Egyptian Art, which Hugh had given her, on her knees, while her companion embarked on a general exposition of the degrees of social precedence in Anglo-Indian Society, with special reference to the importance of the Police in the United Provinces. Ruth could not even listen or answer; a dumb, unreasonable disquietude possessed the back of her mind. She knew it was unreasonable, and yet she could not free herself from it. Out of a mist of words she heard her companion's voice take on a sharper tone:

"Miss Morgan! That man is staring at you as if he knew you. Don't look up until I tell you. Now it's all right, he's turned his back. The tall one in grey flannel."

Ruth knew who it was; she didn't need to look.

"Yes, yes, I know who you mean," she whispered back without raising her eyes. "We travelled down in the train together from Paris."

Mrs. Etherington-Smith grew tense, like a pointer who has scented grouse. Her little eyes were fixed on the tall retreating figure.

"Now I wonder who he can be?" she said. "I had a look at him last night. I thought he was far the most interesting of the men on board. A figure of great distinction. He reminds me a little of a Colonel Cochran in the Seventeenth Lancers, and yet, somehow, he doesn't look like a soldier-man in spite of his fine physique. If you've lived in military stations, as I have, you can always spot them. An interesting face, too,

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I've never seen him speak a word to anyone yet, or look at any one but you. Of course appearances are so deceptive! For all we know he may have an appalling cockney accent. But, no doubt, if you travelled down with him, you can tell me?"

"We didn't speak," said Ruth.

"Well, that's in his favour, anyway," Mrs. Etherington-Smith declared. "Reticence of that kind is so uncommon in these days. Now I come to think of it he looks like an Australian."

"My friend in Paris, who heard him speaking French, thought he was a Belgian. We noticed him particularly because his initials happened to be the same as Hugh's . . . my future husband's."

"Well, there you are! Now we've got something to go on. What did you say your fiancé's initials were?"

Ruth had not even mentioned them, but her companion's insistence could not now be thwarted. From the depths of a bag containing undarned stockings, pink ribbon, rather dirty, old letters and oddments of haberdashery, she produced, triumphantly, a much-thumbed passenger list.

"H. B. . . . H. B. . . ." she muttered, turning the pages with a moist, red thumb. "Yes, yes, I've found him almost at once. Dr. H. Bezuidenhout. He's the only possible one. Now, isn't that clever of me? And what an extraordinary name! Oh, don't you worry yourself; I shall find out everything about him by this evening, even if I have to ask the

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purser and his steward. You don't seem in the very least excited. If you'd been on board ship for more than a week, you'd be just as thrilled as I am."

Ruth was not thrilled. She was just a little frightened, unreasonably, as she confessed again, to feel that this memory, which she had put out of her mind, was still pursuing her. Several times, during the course of that bright, blue day, she found herself under the fire of Bezuidenhout's distant eyes and turned away from them. He did not speak to her; he did not even approach her; yet always, as he stalked the deck, the distinctive odour of his strange tobacco made her aware of his presence, and that presence was like a continually impending threat to her peace of mind.

Why it was so she could not say. A striking figure, as Mrs. Etherington-Smith had admitted, lonely and self-contained. She never saw him speaking to a living soul, not even to men. He walked the decks persistently, almost savagely. He looked too big for them, or they too small for him. Subdued yet potent, he seemed, like a tiger in a cage, sullenly awaiting the moment of escape from the ship's confinement. By the side of him, in his air of spaciousness and power repressed, the other men on the ship, the laughing subalterns and sober business men, seemed feeble and undetermined and detached from life.

"I'm thinking too much of him," Ruth told herself. "The thing is becoming nothing but a ridiculous obsession." But when she closed her eyes, determined to free herself, instead

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of the distant figure in grey flannel she saw brown hands, wide in the palm, that held a heavy book, firm fingers that turned the pages.

All afternoon, deliberately, she lay on her bunk, immersed in the fine print of Maspero; but when the bugle sounded, and Mrs. Etherington-Smith came down to dress for dinner, Ruth found herself compelled to listen to her report.

"I've found out all about him," she announced breathlessly. "Hendrik Bezuidenhout. He isn't Belgian at all. He's a South African. I suppose from his name, he must be of Dutch extraction. You're much too young to remember the Boer War. He's not only a ordinary doctor; he's a Doctor of Science as well. An anthropologist, whatever that may mean. He speaks the most perfect English; I've been talking to him for the last half-hour. Didn't I tell you with my own mouth," she continued triumphantly, "that he looked by far the most interesting man on the ship? Oh yes, and, by the way, he wants to know you! You must have made a conquest; he remembers you perfectly from the train. I told him that I'd introduce him to you after dinner."

"Oh, *why* did you do that?" Ruth cried out angrily. "I wish you hadn't!"

Mrs. Etherington-Smith, who, bare-armed, standing in her chemise, looked like an illustration in some French novel of provincial life, was breathless with amazement; the busy satisfaction faded from her plump face.

"Why, really, from the way you speak, one would think that I'd been indiscreet. Why are you so dramatic? Wasn't

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it the most natural thing in the world for me to talk about you, after what you'd already told me?"

Of course it was, poor Ruth was forced to admit. Controlling herself she made apologies. "You see," she lamely explained, "I'm not really as interested in him as you are. And I want to be quiet. On a short voyage like this it's hardly worth the trouble to make friends."

"It seems I've put my foot in it," her companion grumbled. She was so huffed that during dinner, to Ruth's relief, she devoted herself to her left-hand neighbour, a melancholy tea-planter from Assam; and when the meal was over and they ascended to the lounge, Ruth slipped away from her and hid herself in her cabin with the late Professor Maspero again.

As she undressed and climbed into the top berth she was ashamed to feel that she had behaved like a naughty child. By her defection she had gratuitously insulted a man whom she didn't know. She didn't want to know him. Hadn't she a right, after all, to choose her own acquaintance? Two hours later when she heard the giggle of Mrs. Etherington-Smith in the alley-way, she hurriedly switched off her reading-light and pretended to be asleep.

That, she realized, as she heard her cabin-mate's substantial body flop into the berth beneath, was only putting off the hour of reckoning. As a reasonable grown woman she could not persist, like a sulky flapper, in her refusal to meet Bezuidenhout, for to explain an instinctive disinclination to this woman seemed beyond her powers, and, some-

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how, beneath her dignity. She lay helpless, but rebellious, awaiting the evil moment. Five days, of which one and a half had already gone!

Fortunately for her, the vagaries of the Mediterranean disposed of the insoluble problem. Next morning, north of Sicily, the Tyrrhénian obligingly went mad. The worst fears of Mrs. Etherington-Smith were fulfilled. Ruth was disgracefully and undeniably sea-sick. As soon as she realized her condition that lady dropped her like a hot coal. For three days, in a giddy welter of misery, Ruth lay, methodically refusing the stewardess's temptations to eat, immune from thoughts of Hugh, of Mrs. Etherington-Smith, of Hendrik Bezuidenhout, of anything on earth but the lift, the roll, the sickening, bottomless plungings of the *Malua's* tormented stern.

III

"**Y**OU'D BETTER pull yourself together, miss," the stewardess told her on the fourth morning. "The chief steward says that we shall be into Port Said by seven o'clock; and if you want your bath you'd better hurry up about it."

With infinite carefulness Ruth rose and dressed beneath the sleepy contemptuous eyes of her companion. Mrs. Etherington-Smith was too old a traveller to become excited over Port Said. When Ruth reached the main deck she found its teak planks sodden from their early morning sluicing, the air so saturated with dankness that it seemed powerless to dry them. The veiled sunrise languidly illumined an oily

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waste of green, Nilotic water, through which the *Malua* steamed slowly, like a storm-battered sea-bird making her landfall with tired wingbeats.

As yet the low-lying shores of the delta were no more than a thickening in the horizon's vaporous ring; but though no land could be seen, a sense of its nearness was in the air. Down in the after well-deck the carpenter was busy unbat-tening the cover of the hatch that hid the Port Said luggage. Outside the saloon doors small groups of passengers, whose faces Ruth vaguely remembered having seen on the first day of the voyage, clustered and disputed the difference between land and cloud-bank. They were so eager in their dispute, so absorbed by the prospect of landing, that they took no heed of her, and she was glad that she was not noticed; she had so much to think about.

For one thing, it was a little disturbing to realize that, thanks to the sea astern, the *Malua* had made Port Said half a day earlier than she had expected. The circumstance was one on which the waiting passengers could congratulate themselves, for it would give them the whole day ashore; but, for her, such a deviation from the time-table might easily prove awkward. She had expected that Hugh would manage to leave Luxor and meet her on the quay when she landed; but time at Luxor, in the short digging season, was precious, and if Hugh had calculated finely he might not even have left Cairo by the time that the *Malua* reached her moorings. No doubt, in any case, he would have written beforehand to make a double assurance; even if he were not there to

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meet her, as he surely must be, his letter would come aboard with the other mails in the agent's launch.

There was no need to worry, she told herself again and again; and yet, as the ship swept slowly onward between buoys on which, like heraldic eagles, cormorants spread their wings to dry in the feeble sun; on, past the pointing statue of de Lesseps, into the port, which is the mouth of his canal, her heart was nervous and fluttered with instinctive apprehensions. It was natural and right, she decided, that she should feel so moved. There was always something impressive in the slow dignity with which a ship, after long voyaging, comes to rest, deliberately, as though the symbolical thunder of her anchors going down marked the end of a definite period in her life and in the lives of her passengers. And this arrival on the shores of another land, another continent, this meeting with the man whom she loved, upon the eve of marriage, was surely the most momentous occasion of her life. Suddenly, on her left, the sun appeared, smiling, with the face of a child that has been playing hide-and-seek. The mournful anchorage leapt into light and life; the tall house-walls, with their gigantic advertisements of cigarettes, awoke; the wide boulevard that fronts the quays became agitated with movement and swarming life. The people on board could hear the voices of those on land; shrill voices, screaming in unimaginable Arabic. Two vast coal-lighters, crowded with figures in turbans, came drifting down and alongside, like blunt-nosed fragments of metal swayed to the *Malua's* magnet. The launch of the sanitary authority, flying

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the Egyptian Crescent, churned to the gangway with imperious hoots. Another launch, the agents', rocked in the offing, waiting for *pratique*.

Ruth peered over the side, half expecting that Hugh would be in it. He was not there. Only a dapper young gentleman from the office and two uniformed porters, carrying bags of mails. Some letter at least. . . . She hurried down the companion to the vestibule of the dining-saloon, where passengers were already waiting for their mail before the initialled pigeon-holes. The bored chief steward sorted them methodically. Ruth, at the edge of the crowd, kept her eyes fixed on the pigeon-holes which bore the letter *M*. The sorting was over. There was no letter for her. All around her, passengers stood tearing open their envelopes, oblivious of everything but their own news. She heard the voice of Mrs. Etherington-Smith importantly protesting that all her divided correspondence should have found its way into the pigeon-hole marked *E*. The tall, grey figure of Bezuidenhout slouched past her, a sheaf of letters in his hands. Ruth scarcely noticed him in her distress. She approached the steward, who was already tired of answering questions. Yes, that was all. Another mail might come on board when the next train from Cairo arrived. She turned in despair to Mrs. Etherington-Smith, whose eyes were gloating over her letters as she talked to herself.

"Hugh has not come," she told her, "and there's no letter. Whatever can I do?"

"It's no good asking me," said her cabin-mate distractedly.

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"My youngest boy, who was just going back to Wellington, has got measles," she added in an attempt to explain her pre-occupation. "I suppose you'll have to go ashore in any case. You'd better take a *gharri* to the agents and enquire there. Oh, I forgot to tell you," she cried as she retreated, "I've seen the purser, and it's all right. I'm going to have the cabin to myself. If I don't see you again we'd better say good-bye."

They made a hurried and meaningless farewell. As soon as Ruth escaped her she hurried on deck again. If there were no letter it seemed obvious that Hugh himself was coming to meet her. Already the heavy luggage was going ashore. Launch after launch came foaming gaily up to the ladder, pulled home by yelling boatman; but still no Hugh. If she hung on aboard the *Malua* till the arrival of the second mail she might miss her train to Cairo. There wasn't another before the middle of the afternoon. And if she caught the train she might miss Hugh altogether. She was weak with hunger, and yet, for very distress, she could not eat. This was the second ugly trick the sea had played her. Anything would have been preferable to this wretched uncertainty. Hopelessly mixed with other Port Said luggage she recognized her own trunks swinging over the side. Perhaps she could not do better than take Mrs. Etherington-Smith's advice. She hurried back to the cabin to collect her smaller luggage behind a closed porthole that imprisoned the perfumes of Mrs. Etherington-Smith's toilet.

In the midst of this confusion she heard a voice that called

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her own name. At last, the strayed letter . . . or even Hugh! It was not Hugh's voice.

The deck-lounge steward, suave and attentive in anticipation of an extra tip, held out a letter to her.

"I think this must be yours, miss. It must have got by accident into the *N's*."

She thanked him and took it eagerly. After a moment's hesitation he disappeared. The envelope was addressed in a scrawl of pencil which she recognized as Hugh's; the letter inside was brief and lamely phrased, as if each word had been a trouble to write. He had been ill, he said. A feverish cold. Nothing to worry about; only it meant that he could not meet her. Mrs. Redlake was making all arrangements—he didn't suggest what the arrangements were—Ruth was his own darling, he loved her and only lived for the ecstasy of their meeting. Nothing more. Arrangements? What arrangements?

Again she heard a man's voice call her name. She pulled her valise aside and opened the door to see Bezuidenhout.

"You are Miss Morgan?" he said. There was nothing foreign about his voice.

"Yes, yes. What do you want?"

"I have a letter," he began, "from Luxor."

"For me? Another? Oh, thank you so much!"

"No, not for you. About you. I imagine you've heard too?"

"Yes, yes; I've heard. I'm afraid there is something wrong. Please don't keep it from me."

"Let me explain," he began solemnly. "I'm attached to the

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North Bromwich Expedition. I gather that you're coming to stay with us."

He spoke slowly, severely, as if he were preparing for some other announcement. What deeper meanings did his seriousness withhold? Ruth's head swam. She clutched weakly at the door, feeling that unless she supported herself she must fall. "If . . . if it's anything terrible," she said, "please tell me at once. I'd rather you didn't deceive me . . . I'd rather know."

He smiled. The smile relieved her even before he spoke. "No, no, it's not as tragic as that," he assured her. "I imagined you'd have heard already. It's simply that Mrs. Redlake has written asking me to look after you. So here I am, completely at your disposal. I don't want to rush you; but if we're to catch the morning train we've no time to waste. Are these your things?"

"Yes, this . . . and this." She became aware of the vagueness of her attitude. "Excuse me," she said. "I haven't thanked you. I know I'm behaving atrociously. Only . . . that letter. You're sure, quite sure you aren't keeping anything back?"

"I never do," he said. "Here it is. You can read it for yourself."

He handed her the letter. A hurried note that asked him to take care of her. No reference, not a single word, to Hugh. Evidently his illness, whatever it might be, was too trifling to mention.

Ruth pulled herself together. Already she was ashamed of

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her intensity, of the strain which she had imposed upon a stranger's forbearance. There was no time for explanations. He smiled at her apologies. In one moment he had secured a porter, hoisted Ruth's luggage on to his shoulders, told him, in Arabic, what to do with it. "That's all?" he asked. "Yes, that's everything." "Then come along."

He drew back for her to precede him. At the head of the gangway they passed Mrs. Etherington-Smith, immersed in confidences with some new arrival. Her eyes goggled at the sight of Ruth in Bezuidenhout's company; the word "measles" shaped itself mechanically on her lips; then her mouth twisted into a slow and mischievously meaning smile.

Ruth blushed and called "good-bye" as she passed her. It was fantastically, poetically just that she should be seen leaving the ship in the company of the man whom she had so carefully avoided. A fine addition to Mrs. Etherington-Smith's repertory of stories. What did it matter?

What, for the moment, did anything matter but speed? From the instant in which the porter had shouldered her luggage she found herself in the grip of a mechanism so precise in its efficiency that she was absolved from the need, deprived of the power of thinking for herself. She could contribute nothing to it but a blind acquiescence. "I'm as helpless as a passenger in an aeroplane," she thought; and, indeed, the rapidity with which she was whirled over the bright water and through the shining air, the unfamiliarity of sounds and sights and smells with which she was surrounded, might justify the image.

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They stepped out on to a pontoon and hurried through the customs. There, at least, she imagined that her help would be needed; but it was Bezuidenhout who took her keys, opened her boxes, and explained, in his swift guttural Arabic, the embarrassing nature of her trousseau. A curious situation, she thought, as the Ford car jolted them through the aromatic dust of the road to the station; not only because of the mocking gesture with which fate had thrown her into the hands of this particular man, but because the whole proceeding was so unlike her. All through her life, at Cheltenham, at Castel Ditches, she had been forced to rely on her own strength and self-reliance. Even in Hugh's company her practical and energetic mind had asserted itself, making decisions and taking the lead when things were to be done. And here she was, as biddable and helpless as a child, submitting without a murmur to a stranger's guidance. How soft, how incapably feminine, he must imagine her! If he did that, he was gravely mistaken.

"Your ticket?" he said. "I'd better take the two together."

"Can't I do that myself?" she asked.

"Of course, if you want to. Book through to Luxor. There's a differential tariff for distances. I suppose you've Egyptian money?"

She confessed that she had not.

"Then leave it to me. You can pay me later."

He disappeared, leaving her to realize the failure of her first faint attempt at self-assertion. She waited for him

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humbly. The porters followed them obediently. The luggage was stowed into the van.

IV

THE CAIRO train ran slowly, like a creature uncertain of its balance, along the embankment between the dreamy, shimmering lake of Menzaleh and the sweet-water canal. By now the sun shone violently on the lake's pale, windless expanse and waves of white light reflected from its surface came dancing through the sand-dusted windows into Ruth's eyes. They hurt her; but the water held her fascinated. White birds there were, with long necks and fragile waders' legs. They stood there as though entranced by their reflections in the bright water, so little heed they took of the lumbering train; they seemed suspended, like herself, in an intoxication of sunlight and sweet air. An Orient liner suddenly towered above them, blotting out the glaring expanse of desert to eastward. She seemed no real ship but an apparition, her yellow funnels smoking, herself abandoned for ever in a sea of sand. On the near bank of the sweet-water canal a native, in long white robes, drove down two camels to drink. The mother, an ugly brute with plaques of grey callus on her knees and a coat like a worn doormat, threw back her head and bared her teeth, straddling her ungainly legs in fright. The baby, a pale, dun, shrinking creature, huddled to its mother's side and shivered in all its limbs. Ruth saw the driver snatch at

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the leather thong which pierced the big brute's nostrils so that it shrieked with pain. That wild scream echoed in her ears as the train rolled past.

Its sound awoke Ruth to a new consciousness. Camels . . . Real camels! The sight of these primeval animals, flung into her life out of the Arabian desert, seemed symbolical. More than the hubbub of strange tongues heard at Port Said, more than the aromatic road-dust which had blown into her eyes, their presence assured her that she was veritably in Egypt. It seemed to her an enormous, a portentous thing; it filled her with a curious feeling of insignificance and disorientation. This was not only Egypt but Africa, the tomb of vast and savage mysteries. The yellowish liquid that shimmered in the sweet-water canal had flowed through unimaginable deserts and forests out of the heart of African darkness. Beyond the ship-canal brooded all Asia, older and stranger still.

The greatness of two unfriendly continents oppressed her. In her familiar world, at home, she knew that she could hold her own. In this world, newer yet older, she was sure of nothing. It was useless to face it with the equipment of thoughts and reactions which had sufficed for Cheltenham or Castel Ditches. She knew that she could not meet it without the aid of some spiritual adjustments. Perhaps, indeed, her mind was already answering to the unfamiliar stimuli by some protective change of colour; perhaps that was the explanation of these strange thoughts. Physically, at least, she knew she was the same as ever; all her externals corresponded

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with those of the woman whom she knew. Yet, ever since her departure from Paris she had not been herself. Even if she had not changed, she was changing. How deeply the change might penetrate she was unable to guess.

She closed her eyes. The reflections of sunshine that danced from the lake's surface were blinding. She could easily have moved to the other side of the compartment, but her will, for the moment, seemed paralysed. When she reopened them she became aware of her companion. Their relative positions, at any rate, were familiar. He was sitting in the place which he had occupied throughout the night journey to Marseilles, diagonally opposite her own. Now, as in that sinister, remembered episode, his eyes were closed, his mouth firmly set. His brown hands held the newspaper that he had bought on the platform at Port Said; yet now, strangely enough, she was able to examine him without the instinctive misgivings which had disturbed her before.

Some wakeful sense must have made Bezuidenhout aware of her scrutiny. All of a sudden she found him looking back at her. He smiled.

"Well?" he said.

"Nothing," she answered hastily. "I was trying to get my bearings; thinking how strange everything is."

"How can I help you? You were looking at me. I knew that, although I was half asleep. I can sleep at any time, like Napoleon, but always with one eye open. You examined me in exactly the same way on the journey to Marseilles. Why? I'd like to know."

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The directness of the question was embarrassing: so was his smile. She escaped them by a precipitate retreat: "I'm sorry," she said. "It's true that I was staring at you. It was ill-mannered of me."

"Not in the least. It's I who am inquisitive. As a matter of fact, I'm equally guilty. I was thinking about you. I was wondering why you refused to meet me on the boat."

"That I can't tell you," she answered quickly, with perfect honesty.

"You disliked me at sight?"

"No . . . not exactly. I can't explain, I simply didn't want to."

He laughed: "But you had to, after all. Poetic justice! I *did* want to meet you—more than anyone else on the *Malua*—and . . . here we are!"

"I'm glad we did meet," she admitted. "I don't know what I should have done without you. I'm extremely grateful."

"Grateful? Oh, no. For what?"

"For everything. I was quite at my wits' end when you came and rescued me."

"Like a knight-errant? No, there's nothing romantic about me. Not even my name, which, by the way, you don't know."

"Indeed I do," she protested.

"But you can't pronounce it."

She tried to do so. "No, no," he laughed; "I told you you couldn't. That is quite wrong. It's pronounced: Bezayden-hoat. I'm a Dutch South African."

"I knew that too."

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"Then you were a little interested, like myself? That is better."

"Mrs. Etherington-Smith told me."

"Ah, yes. The policeman's wife. A tiresome woman. She didn't like you, by the way."

Ruth was silent. The information, and the quizzical tone in which he threw it at her, seemed gratuitous. Again he laughed; unpleasantly, she thought. "You're taking me very seriously," he said. "You look puzzled, and a little hostile; and there's no reason why you should be either. You'd like me to behave like the knight-errant I was talking about. You're being romantic and Tennysonian. I can't live up to that. I'm realist, to my backbone. That's the difference between us . . . one of them."

"No, no," she protested, "that isn't true, it isn't fair. You put me in a false position."

"Why worry about positions?" he said. "Why not accept each other as we stand? Two ordinary, unromantic people who have been thrown together by chance, and have to make the best of it? Why, even now you're being solemn and intense. Really . . ."

She interrupted him. "No, no, you're quite wrong. You keep inventing thoughts for me." But as she protested she knew that he spoke the truth; she knew that she couldn't explain her attitude unless she confessed what had happened in the Marseilles train, and that, of course, was unthinkable. She was not natural with him. How could she ever be natural with that ghostly memory in her mind? And, even without

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it, there was something about him, in the build of his body, in the texture of his mind as it had revealed itself in this short, distressing conversation, that was as foreign to her own physique and mould of thought as the dry, harsh African plateaux from which he came to her soft Shropshire hills. She saw him in terms of that unknown but terribly imagined landscape; as one of its wild denizens, untamed and untameable under his cloak of conventional manners. Compared with Hugh's—again the odious contrast!—his strength seemed so inhuman. She would not admit that she was afraid of it. Only, beneath the continued scrutiny of his gaze, she felt herself at a disadvantage, incapable of understanding. Foolishness! Why should she attempt to explain? There was no need for the personal intimacy which, in the first moments of their acquaintance, he had seemed to demand, on which he continued to insist. He had no right to ask it. When had he ever asked it? Never in as many words. The idea of this extravagant demand had been formulated by her own mind, and had no existence outside of it.

And then, as if the instinct which, while he slept, divined her interest in him, had subtly warned him to adopt a less frightening colour, his whole manner, his whole appearance changed. In a moment he had returned to the conventional plane on which she could accept him more easily. Instead of a vaguely terrifying enigma he became an ordinary travelling acquaintance, human, gentle, very nearly polite. Even the quality of the smile with which he regarded her changed.

"We'll forget what we've been saying," he told her. "Now

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I want to talk to you seriously, in a professional capacity. You know I'm a doctor? Well, now I'm speaking as one. The policeman's lady told me that you'd had a bad time on the *Malua*. If she hadn't, I could have seen it for myself. You've eaten nothing this morning? I knew as much. You're starving. Well, now you're going to eat, and after that you'll sleep until I wake you in Cairo. That is my responsibility. You mustn't forget that Mrs. Redlake entrusted you to me."

She protested, feebly, against his designs. In spite of his changed manner she was still suspicious, feeling in the back of her mind that she could not afford to submit to him in anything. The ludicrousness of this position collapsed beneath his insistence. In the end she found herself eating, in spite of herself, the food which he had bought without her knowledge in the Port Said buffet, the sweet, thin-skinned Palestine oranges which he picked up on the platform at Kantara. When she had eaten she was glad of it; the very taste of food seemed to dispel the hopeless tiredness from her body. He offered her wine; but she refused it, remembering the disaster of Mildred's Chianti. At her refusal the old look of teasing, detached amusement came into his eyes. He made no comment; there was no need for words. She knew what was passing in his mind. It was just as if he had said: "There you are again. You're afraid of everything: so rigid and suppressed and suspicious that you daren't even be as human as that." She felt an urgent need to free herself from the unspoken criticism. She took back her refusal and drank. "That's better," his eyes seemed to say. It was rather un-

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canny, the way in which, without words, the struggle between them continued.

She determined to get the better of it, to forget it. The wine made her accept the idea of sleep which she so greatly needed. She allowed him to fold his great-coat as a cushion for her head. There was nothing in his continued gentleness, naturalness, courtesy against which she need be on her guard. Once again he had put her in the wrong; she felt that she owed him an apology for her awkwardness, and tried to express it by a more complete submission.

"Now you will think of nothing," he said. "Nothing but sleep."

He stood above her, for a moment, motionless; but though she had closed her eyes and could not see him, she felt as though his hands, those hands that troubled her most when they were unseen, had been laid upon her brow in an hypnotic gesture. Her mind no longer rebelled against them. Their influence was stabilizing, soothing. She was too sleepy to struggle any longer. So be it. Let them have their way.

V

THE LUGGAGE was stored in the Cairo cloak-room; their places in the Luxor sleeping-car had been booked. Bezuidenhout and Ruth—a new Ruth, refreshed and revived by the first settled sleep she had known since she embarked on the *Malua*—stepped out into the brilliant whiteness of the station square. In that sleep there must have been some magic that

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had charmed away the troubled, uneasy atmosphere in which she had disembarked. Now she was herself again. Through all her body flowed the zest of her own buoyant health. Her spirits were as fresh and eager as those of a child on a holiday; conscious of this unwilled elation, which flooded her mind like a burst of April sunshine between showers, she determined to make the most of it.

Indeed, there was no room for reservations in such a brilliant air as this; its clear, sun-sweetened cool exhilarated her; its very dryness was stimulating after the salt moisture of the *Malua*; its clarity sharpened her senses so that she seemed to have acquired new acuity of sight, as when, in childhood, she had played the game of looking at the world with her head upside down. Now, in the same way, but with her head more firmly balanced on her shoulders than usual, everything that she saw had acquired a freshness of form and colour that amazed and excited her. The tram-cars that went clanging past with their exotic loads of men in tarbushes and veiled women; the long-shafted country-carts with families of dark-skinned fellaheen on board; the strings of camels, solemnly stalking through this modern city beneath mountainous burdens of green lucerne; the various life and movement and sound with which she was surrounded; all had the power to excite wonder in her eager brain. The miracle was too precious to be wasted. She determined to enjoy herself.

And Bezuidenhout, when once the practical exigencies of travel were behind him, took his own colour from her exhilaration. He was as bright and gay as any schoolboy, with

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amused eyes, and, on his lips, a smile that was very different from that with which he had questioned her in the train. The change in her surprised and delighted him. He took it gaily, triumphantly, as if he knew that his own influence had been responsible for it.

"We've the whole day in front of us," he said; "and I'm your dragoman. This is the centre of Cairo. Where do you want to go?"

"I'm in your hands," she told him. "Everything is strange to me. You can take me anywhere and show me anything that you want to, and when you're sick of me you can just dump me down like a piece of luggage."

"Why do you say that?" he began, not reproachfully, but as though he was curious to know. Then he laughed shortly and changed his angle. "I am an old inhabitant," he said, "while you are a tourist. There are things every tourist is expected to see."

"But please don't treat me as one," she begged him. "Do what you like and, if I'm not a nuisance, let me go with you."

He hesitated; always the bright medley of colour and movement surged through Ruth's brain. "Well," he continued, "there's the Museum at Boulak, with half what's left of ancient Egypt inside it. I don't know what they'll say at Luxor if you miss that."

The Museum at Boulak: the Museum at North Bromwich! Why should these endless parallels present themselves? Four months before, in their last, hurried meeting, Hugh had dragged her into the Egyptian gallery at North Bromwich.

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She remembered the hollow echoes of their footfalls on marble stairs, the thick, devitalized air of the museum chambers. Not even that mortal air, not even her own warm presence, could influence the hectic flame of Hugh's enthusiasm. Under those soot-blackened skies she had accepted it; but here, in this brilliant air, where so much life expanded and palpitated in the sun, calling on her to share it, her spirit shrank from a repetition of the experience. Yet, as an archæologist's wife—it had nearly come to that—in the company of another archæologist, she felt it her duty to be interested.

"Then," he went on with the same mockery in his voice, "there's the Museum of Arabic Art, for what it's worth. I'm competent to act as a guide to either of them."

A shade of the old Bezuidenhout lurked in his eyes as he waited for her reply. It came, inexplicably, even to herself.

"You'll think me a Philistine," she said, "but I can't help it. Do you know, I feel it's a shame to visit museums on a day like this, when everything's so . . . alive?"

"Alive?" he answered quickly. "Why do you use that word? Thank heaven you felt it like that!" he went on. He glowed, he became magnified as he spoke. "That is the truth. That's how I feel myself. These museums are tombs. Even when things are beautiful in themselves, as soon as you put them in a museum and isolate them from their purpose you kill them. You're right, a thousand times right. *Let the dead bury their dead!* That was a living word. I tell you, when once you've lived in Thebes you'll know the rightness of it!"

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The ardour of his sudden approval almost scorched her. He was transformed; she felt that she was sharing in his transformation. Her heart beat with an unfamiliar exultation.

"Well, we have chosen life," he said, "so, for five hours, we'll live."

He hailed a two-horse *arabieh*, and helped her into it. He gave the driver his directions. Out of the modern streets they passed into an open square, with lower houses on every side, where the trams converged on to a terminus; a babel of clanging bells and voices and hurrying figures. It seemed like the source from which some subterranean river was emerging, forcing its flood of dazed humanity upward, outward, to swirl and bubble in the light of day. In every direction, inexhaustibly, the brown flood flowed, like storm-water, seething, settling into every channel that could contain it. Against this surging rapid their carriage advanced slowly, like a boat urged upstream. The driver waved his whip, and cried out shrilly as he advanced.

"What is he saying?" Ruth asked.

"He's courteously demanding a right of way: 'Now, father, be careful, I'm coming on the right. Look to your feet, my son! No danger, mother, keep in to the left!'" He translated as they went. "Here, as you'll notice, all men are still equal. '*Shamalek hinnar!*'" he called.

The driver, obeying, held out his whip and swerved to the left. A street of narrow, congested pavements, with open, gaping shop-fronts on either side. The houses leaned toward each other, with their screened balconies out-thrust, as though

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they feared to fall and sought the support of their opposites. The odour of compact humanity joined with the smell of spices to fill the air with a soft somnolence. After the hubbub of the square this street seemed strangely silent. Soft-footed, with a rapt and inward calm, the current flowed darkly as in the channels of a tree-shadowed river, silent, but most powerfully alive. A life, Ruth thought, that expressed itself in looks rather than words; looks of kohl-brightened eyes, slyly peering over the rim of a white yashmak; looks of brown Jewish eyes, crafty and vivacious, eyes of the hunted; old Arab eyes, keen and dispassionate, like those of melancholy eagles, set in grey-bearded faces. All dark, and cold, and wise; all staidly critical, calm, and a thought contemptuous. Ruth felt, under their scrutiny, that her own dazzling fairness was an offence. These eyes devoured it, and spat it out again. Saving Bezuidenhout's company she would have been frightened.

"Here we dismount," he told her. "This is the easiest way into the *Mouski*; by the street of the perfume-sellers. For heaven's sake don't lose me. You'd better take my arm."

The narrow passage was roofed overhead with rotten boarding through which a half-light penetrated. A tepid, drowsy air filled the soft-footed silence; an air, she thought, of summer moonlight in a garden shaded by heavy leaves, drenched by the odour of unseen flowers. She fainted in a dream of musk and jasmine and ambergris. On the carpeted *mastabas* of the shops fat perfume-sellers squatted, like drones made drunk by the richness of their own wares. One of them

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greeted her companion with a slow smile of recognition and waved his hand in welcome.

Bezuidenhout threw him a joke in Arabic. "This," he told Ruth, "is one of our most time-honoured frauds. Mysterious blends of perfume distilled for foreigners. Rose-gardens in Persia; amber out of the stomachs of Pacific whales. Carry back to London a guinea's worth of the glamour of the East! Shall I tell you the truth, or would you rather I didn't? Most of this sickly rubbish comes from Germany; a by-product of the dye industry; so you needn't consume your imagination on it. Acres of rose-gardens are all very well; but how much better acres of golden wheat! If you need perfumes, here they are, without the waste of a thousandth part of the human energy we used to squander on them. Come along. . . ."

He led her through an alley and pushed open a warped door. The gloom within was threaded, as by the industry of innumerable spiders, with a fine cobweb of raw silk that swayed and shimmered in the half-light like a weaving mist of amber. It was so quiet, this silk-spinning, the glistening threads unwound and slid from their wooden spools with a whisper so soft and sibilant that Ruth could scarcely believe that they were in motion. As silently, she thought, must garden spiders spin their gossamer, under the same subdued, nocturnal gloom. Suddenly the bemused spinners became aware of their presence; an old man, ugly-toothed, turned round and leered at them. Two tiny boys, with naked feet, whose duty it was to watch the winding spools, came patter-

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ing to their sides, grinning, and holding out their hands for money. "*Bakshéesh*," they whispered, "*Bakshéesh . . . bakshéesh, bakshéesh. . .*" And the sound of their persistent whisper was soft, silken, sibilant like that of the winding spools and threading spindles.

Bezuidenhout picked up a thread and examined it. He questioned the old man who had leered at them. His voice was like the swish of a stick tearing gossamer, breaking Ruth's enchantment.

"Another disillusionment for you," he told her. "This isn't real silk, the stuff they used to get from China. Wood-fibre. Lombardy poplar, chewed by machinery that's more efficient than the jaws of silk-worms, and strained through nozzles of platinum. But then, why not? If steel can take the place of a hatch of miserable insects that a hailstorm can destroy, so much the better. I see that the idea shocks you?"

"No, I'm not shocked," she said; "only you seem to me a little contradictory." His smile, challenged, encouraged her. "You see," she went on, "I don't think you ought to be an archaeologist."

"You're right," he told her, "perfectly right. As a matter of fact that's not the proper description of me. My job is anthropology. I go down to Luxor with my callipers to measure skulls, because I'm curious about the history of mankind. I happen to be some sort of authority on the subject. When I was a boy I lived among the few remaining bushmen in South Africa on the edge of the Kalahari. But anthropology, although it's mixed up with the other thing, is a

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living science. My ancient Egyptian skulls are only incidental to it. It's concerned with the future infinitely more than with the past."

She could not see what his defence was driving at.

"You seem to me so destructive," she said.

"Destructive? My dear Miss Morgan, you can't destroy things that are already dead. And you can't bring them to life again either. If you were a tourist gaping through the Mouski in the ordinary way you might be thinking all the time: 'How delightful this is, to see an Oriental city just as it was two thousand years ago: all the same careful crafts carried on in the same old wasteful manner; the same deplorable sanitation and filth and garbage: the same endemic smallpox; the same infantile mortality; the same imprisoned women!' You might be persuaded that it was a thing to gloat and dream over, just as your sentimental archæologists gloat and dream over death. That's the 'unchanging East' of the tourist agencies' advertisements. That's the result of 'Oriental wisdom.' But don't you realize that change and life are synonymous . . . that static things are dead things, that a static civilization is a civilization sick to death? And this civilization, thank heaven, isn't as static as the romantics would like to suppose. It's changing every moment. If it didn't change, in another century or two humanity would starve. That is the marvellous, inspiring, exhilarating fact. That's where we triumph. Do you think those aniline waste-products, useless as they are, and that artificial silk aren't just as significant symptoms of human evolution as the dis-

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covery of vaccination or the fact that the vermiform appendix is gradually disappearing?"

His words, or, more than these, the vigour and faith that informed them, evoked, in Ruth, a passionate agreement and carried her along with him. To pass through so much strangeness in the company of a mind so eager, so ruthless, so intrinsically hopeful, was a spiritual adventure such as she had never known before. From time to time the fabric of her thoughts took fire from his and went up in a flare, illuminating, to her wonder, some new corner of her brain that she had never explored. He seemed to her as various as he was vital, as sensitive to beauty and keen to find it as he was pitiless toward ugliness and waste. But while she glowed at the heat of his flame she was still a little frightened by it; his very ruthlessness made him seem inhuman; at times her strength flagged, her exhausted and bewildered spirit cried out for the mercy of rest; that other tranquil ecstasy which she had known with Hugh at Castel Ditches.

And always, when she was most at one with him, his contrast with Hugh returned to haunt her and accuse her of a disloyalty which she could not admit. Beyond Bezuidenhout's burning actuality the ghost of Hugh in Luxor surveyed her with reproachful eyes and lips compressed in silent distaste at this heretical exhibition. That ghostly presence subdued her; its eyes, resentful and critical, made her heart go cold. She could not escape from them. They were, she thought, the eyes of an ill man; and pity, more potent than any other emotion, reduced her to silence.

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"You're tired," Bezuidenhout said, with unexpected tenderness. "Why didn't you tell me before? I'm afraid I've overwalked you."

"Yes, I am rather tired," she admitted, ashamed to ask for respite. "I've scarcely walked a yard since we left Marseilles."

He took her arm again. "I'd much rather he didn't," she thought, in spite of her tiredness. "But, after all, he's a doctor," she reassured herself, gladly accepting his help. It seemed as if the brown hands gave her strength as once before they had given rest.

"We'll go to Shepherd's and have tea on the terrace. They're sure to ask you at Luxor if I've taken you there. Perhaps that will atone for our scamping the museums. Don't tire yourself by looking at anything else or listening to my rubbish. I'll take you by the shortest cut."

She obeyed. They went in silence through narrow and unfrequented streets from which the flood of the Mouski seemed to have drained away. The houses were blind and secret. There, in the teeming heart of Cairo, was the peace of a dim forest. Once more the sound of the markets reached them like a roar of waters. Under the twin minarets of the Mosque of Weeping they emerged into a crowd so densely packed that they could not move. Into that open space the human torrent poured again, like a river foaming into a pool. Bezuidenhout clutched her arm more tightly.

"We must wait a moment," he said. "It's not worth while going round. There's some sort of procession coming—re-

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ligious, I expect, or else a funeral. *Absit omen!* Listen, can you hear the band?"

Out of a darkened alley on their left Ruth heard a discordant shrilling of flutes, a blare of brass, a thrumming of drums. It floated, this barbaric music, like the scream of some savage, inarticulate animal above the clamour of voices scarcely more human. Two helpless policemen tried to force back the crowd with the lengths of their carbines. The head of the procession debouched into the space which the carbines cleared; a pack of ragged urchins, scrambling, scuffling, like hounds at feeding-time, for the nickel coins that were thrown to them from the crowd, the screened balconies, the house-tops.

"Not death this time," said Bezuidenhout; "we're in luck. It's a Moslem wedding."

The music turned a hidden corner; the drums growled angrily; the flutes squealed like piccolos. High above all these sounds, like the wild whinny of kites circling the minarets of the Mosque of Weeping or sea-birds lost in mist, Ruth heard a shrill, quavering call, that seemed to hover above the procession. Human, yet strangely unearthly, it made her spine shiver; awakened unrecognizable echoes in her brain. Sounds that quivered as the thin tongues of snakes, as ribbons of silk blown flame-like on a forced draught. The air was full of them; they flickered nervously through her brain like wild thought rather than sound.

"That noise . . . what is it?" she asked him, in a whisper.

"What noise?"

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"I can't describe it. It seems to be in the air. There it is again. Listen! You must hear it."

"Yes, yes, I hear it. Now I know what you mean. It's the marriage-cry of the women. You can't see them. They're peering down, hundreds of them, from behind the *ashrabiehs*—the carved screens of the balconies."

"It's queer . . . disturbing."

"It's meant to be disturbing. It's meant to excite everybody: the bride particularly."

"I think it's horrible. It takes possession of you. I'd like to stop my ears, so as not to hear it."

He laughed: "How English you are! Look, look, they're coming!"

They came: in front a wild and ragged figure, balancing, like some fantastic drum-major, a garlanded pole. He leapt, he swerved, naked to the waist, with obscene cries, with mad contortions of his body and leering face, balancing, brandishing, tossing his tall pole till it seemed to acquire a separate, wizard life, inspired, like his abandoned body, with a hot, phallic impulse that took its rhythm from the following drum-taps and drew its life from the trembling, thin flames of the women's cries. And something buried, old, forgotten, in Ruth's brain, something that she could not control, awoke and throbbed and leapt in time to his leaping.

Now, from the screened balconies on either side of the street, the high, excited marriage-call thrilled more loudly; the crowd stirred, like a roused animal; in its fluent mass she was pressed forward, so that she had to clutch at Bezuiden-

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hout's arm; a rain of nickel coins fell and tinkled in the roadway; the children fought and screamed for them. A motor-car, with blinds closely drawn, crept forward cautiously in low gear.

"The bride," Bezuidenhout said. "Look quickly, or you'll miss her."

Through the glass wind-screen Ruth caught the momentary glimpse of a veiled face; black, haunted eyes that stared before them over the white yashmak. The drums thudded; the blare of brass hurt her ears. They passed; the crowd, Ruth and Bezuidenhout with them, surged in behind. He grasped her arm more firmly and carried her forward.

"I'm glad we saw it," he was telling her. "That, at any rate, was something you haven't seen before."

"Yes," she agreed, "I'm glad we saw it."

But she was not glad. She was still disturbed and puzzled, not so much by what she had seen and heard as by her own, uncalculated reaction to it. Long after, when the excited drum-beats had died away, and they were passing through streets that were quiet and orderly on their way to Shepherd's, the shrill quaver of the women's marriage-cry went flickering through her brain.

Beneath the garish awnings on the hotel terrace they took their tea. Ruth found herself a little tired and silent. Bezuidenhout, sensitive to her mood, though, mercifully, ignorant of its causes, relapsed into another of kind and studied politeness for which she was thankful, for at present she could not deal with anything that made demands on intelligence or

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emotion. They ate and drank, talking of superficial and insignificant things, watching the bewildered triumph of female tourists who returned flushed and hot-footed from their sight-seeing; smiling together over the victims' hurried, bashful attempts to escape from the clutches of the dragomans into whose cunning hands they had fallen, and who still pursued them with servile, insolent, contemptuous eyes. One of them, a magnificent ruffian, stately in a burnous lined with silk, approached them with ingratiating gestures and offered his card. Bezuidenhout answered him in Arabic; he smiled, saluted, and moved away.

"A handsome rascal," Bezuidenhout told her; "but I doubt if there's any creature lower in the scale of corrupt humanity than the dragoman of the Cairo hotels. Another parasite, preying on the old, dead, rotten nonsense of the desert's romance. Universal providers of spurious glamour. If only you pay them enough, they'll rig up everything you want from faked scarabs and Persian carpets to a full stage-setting of the Garden of Allah. No matter how old and ugly you are, they'll even make love to you, if that's included in your programme. I could tell you a story. . . . No, I won't. We needn't even think of them, I should get excited, and you'd think me more destructive—was it?—than ever. If we're going to talk, let's talk about something more important; ourselves, for example. Do you realize that you haven't even told me why you're going to Thebes?"

She smiled. "You didn't ask me."

"I know I didn't," he admitted; "and yet, to tell you the

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truth, I've been wondering all the afternoon. It seemed so queer, such a dramatic contrast, that you, who are just as young and fresh and vital—no, I'm not paying you dutiful compliments; I mean it, every word—as you can be, should be carrying all these splendid qualities into that—that negation of life. I've been wondering, all the time, how you'll react to it. You'll say I've no right to wonder. Well, that can't be helped. We'll imagine that I'm merely wondering on scientific grounds. Call it a matter of spiritual research. I suppose you're a friend of the Redlakes? They're delightful, both of them. I shall only be there for a month; a time of pretty hectic work, I expect. How long do you propose to stay?"

"Until April, I suppose," she told him, "until the digging's over. Perhaps I ought to have explained. Do you know a man named Bredon . . . Hugh Bredon?"

"No, I can't say I've heard of him. Who is he?"

"He's a young archæologist; a member of the North Bromwich Expedition staff. He's working there, and I've come out to marry him."

"To marry him? Good God! Why didn't you tell me before?"

He spoke so earnestly, so rapidly, her revelation affected him so surprisingly, that she felt forced to turn the intensity of the moment into a joke.

"I hope you've no objection, Mr. Bezuidenhout?"

Recovering himself, he laughed out loud. "My dear Miss Morgan, what difference would it make if I had?"

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"None . . . absolutely none," she solemnly assured him.

For a moment they were silent. Bezuidenhout sat looking straight in front of him and past her at the stream of tar-bushed elegants and slim-ankled, olive-eyed Levantine women that flowed across Shepherd's terrace to the revolving doors behind which an orchestra was playing dance tunes. He looked so queerly preoccupied that Ruth was sorry for him. She had done nothing. Why should she be sorry? She spoke softly:

"You're very quiet. What are you thinking about?"

"About Thebes . . . and you," he answered. "A psychological problem."

"You needn't worry, you know," she assured him.

He brought his eyes into focus on her own. They softened, they asked pardon.

"I wasn't . . . I won't," he said. "Excuse my damnable manners, I wish you all the happiness that you deserve."

"You have to qualify even my happiness?"

"If it were mine to give," he answered suddenly, "you should have all the happiness in the world."

She blushed, and was silent.

PART THREE



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I

THE WHITE sleeping-car jolted slowly up the valley of the Nile. Ruth, in her solitary coupé, had awakened early to see the sun rise, turning the lunar desolation of the Eastern horizon into a lake of fire in which the mountain summits grew incandescent, dissolved, and then reformed themselves, like fused rocks cooling, crystallizing in permanent shapes as they emerged out of the fluidity of an igneous age into the sterile fixedness of this. Then, for a contrast, she became aware of the piercing, unnatural greenness of the valley through which the train dragged her southward; the greenness of a stupendous fertility, mile on slow mile, flat, uniform, so monotonous in its still intensity of life that it seemed dead. Mile after mile of velvety emerald lucerne; a sea of greenness, so vast that if her eyes rested for one moment on the dun-coloured villages of mud-brick with their protective fringes of date-palms, they were instantly submerged and overwhelmed by following waves of green.

Even the men and animals, which moved to their morning's work in slow procession along the banks of confining dykes, were as like to each other as pebbles on a beach. The same disconsolate camels, with shaggy necks outstretched,

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lurched forward with the same deliberate gait; the same bowed water-carriers crouched beneath the same bloated skins; the same small donkeys tripped with the same swathed human burdens; the same brown, naked children dawdled behind the same mixed flocks of goats and thick-tailed sheep; monotonous, all, as the figures of a frieze conventionalized and fixed in stone two thousand years ago.

Only at wayside stations, where a brown crowd scrambled among donkeys waiting with empty packs, and the morning breeze from the north, unnoticed when the train was in motion, rattled the dry leaves of the platform eucalyptus, was she aware of any individual activity; and even this, as station succeeded station with identical movements and sounds, revealed itself as another figure, faithfully repeated, in the green carpet, whose liveliness was as fixed and conventionalized as all the rest. She found that if she closed her eyes for a space and then re-opened them it was difficult to believe that she had changed her position or that the train was really in motion at all. She might travel thus for ever and never arrive at any difference.

Suddenly the obelisk of Hatshepsut towered against temple pylons above the village of Karnak. The sight awakened her with a shock of surprise. People in the adjoining compartment were lifting down their luggage. Somebody tapped lightly on the door of her coupé. It was Bezuidenhout, summoning her to be prepared for their arrival. His voice was the first living sound she had heard that morning.

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"Five minutes," he said, "I hope you have everything ready? There'll be a rush at Luxor with all these tourists."

"Yes, I'm quite ready," she said. She joined him in the corridor. They shook hands formally, as if they were strangers. Ever since that one embarrassed moment on the terrace at Shephard's he had treated her with the same unnatural courtesy. The shyness which swept over her at the prospect of beginning a new stage in her adventure made her resent his detachment. She needed, now more than ever, friendliness and companionship to sustain her. He gave her no more than that of a hired courier. He stood beside her in silence puffing at his pipe of Boer tobacco, stooping to stare out of the window at the scabrous houses, the streets littered with strippings of sugar-cane which composed the squalid outskirts of Oriental Luxor.

From the dense, coloured crowd on the platform a woman caught sight of Bezuidenhout's stooping figure and waved an ivory-handled fly-switch.

"That's Mrs. Redlake," he told her. "Evidently she's come to meet you."

But not Hugh. It was strange that only in these last few moments, as an answer, perhaps, to Bezuidenhout's detachment, had the anticipation of meeting Hugh filled her mind. Now that she saw Mrs. Redlake waiting for her alone, she felt vaguely guilty toward Hugh; guilty for her previous lack of anxiety, and therefore doubly anxious. It seemed to her that Mrs. Redlake's presence was ominous, that she was a bearer of ill news; there was a look of sombre

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preoccupation in Mrs. Redlake's face. But when, as she descended to the platform, this dark, stout, motherly woman, with kind blue eyes and a loud, careless laugh, took her suddenly in her arms and kissed her on both cheeks, her assurance swiftly returned: she knew, at once, that she had nothing to fear.

"Tell me at once," she said. "How is he?"

"Listen to her! What a thing, to be young and in love!" said Mrs. Redlake. "I suppose you've been thinking of nothing else since Port Said. Why, he's all right. One of these Luxor colds. You're bound to get them at first from the dust of the digging; but once you're inoculated—is that right, H. B.?—you never get them any more. He had a fever with it, so we made him stay in bed up till to-day, though I can tell you it took some doing to keep him there, when it came to meeting you." She turned to Bezuidenhout and wrung his hand in a hearty grasp. "Well, well, H. B., how are you?"

"The same as ever," he said, smiling. It was evident that these two were old friends and understood each other.

"They're all eagerly waiting for you," she told him. "Some excitement in your line about a lot of eleventh dynasty ladies they've dug up behind the temple at Dêr-el-Bahari, poor things. I hope you're ready for work, because you're going to find it."

"That's what I'm here for," Bezuidenhout answered. "One doesn't come to Thebes for pleasure."

"Still the same old H. B.! You've come, like Balaam, to curse us. One of these days you'll get a shock, like Balaam

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did. Which reminds me: I told the donkeys to wait on the other side. The hotels are awful just now—full of Cooks’—and I thought we’d put off breakfast till we got home. What do you say? Very well, then get the luggage together. I’ll look after Ruth. I’m going to call you Ruth at once,” she continued, as Bezuidenhout disappeared. “Over at Astill House we’re all like a big family. It’s impossible to live at such close quarters without being sort of intimate. You don’t mind, do you?”

Of course she didn’t mind. Mrs. Redlake was the first reassuring person she had met since she left Castel Ditches; in such a friendly presence she felt that she must accept, as she had been accepted. Here was a middle-aged woman who was obviously happy, who took life easily, gladly, as it came, and was no fool. Ruth warmed to her happiness, her frankness, her kindliness. The awkward intensity of Bezuidenhout’s companionship troubled her no longer.

“Why, is that everything?” Mrs. Redlake cried. “You are a Spartan couple.”

Bezuidenhout handed up the tickets. They left the station, followed by two porters whose shoulders were humped like those of water-buffaloes, and climbed into a waiting *arabieh*, which soon left the confused and struggling mass of tourists behind.

The wheels ran swiftly, softly over the road’s felting of dust. A cool but sunlit air moved from the river, a sweet air, full of morning gaiety and ease, that warmed Ruth’s heart with a contented and yet adventurous rapture. Mrs. Red-

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lake sat at her side, her large mouth happily composed, her blue eyes blinking at the sun which swept across them in brilliant bars. Bezuidenhout's face was serious and compressed. It seemed unnatural to Ruth that he didn't expand like the rest of them. She disliked him for it. No, it was not dislike; already she knew him too well for that; only, behind his sombre features, she thought that she could see the old shadow of grudging and contempt for the surface of spurious colour; the gaudy carpets hung out for sale, the fascinating mixture of silks and ivories and false curios that brightened the shop windows and enchanted her foreign eyes. Why couldn't he, for once in a way, accept things, as she did, at their superficial value?

He was ridiculous. She would like to laugh him out of it.

"Quick . . . quick. Look there!" Mrs. Redlake's fingers tightened familiarly on her arm. "You see that roof? That is the English Church in the grounds of the Luxor Hotel, where you'll be married. H. B., has she told you her exciting news?"

Ruth watched him nod his head in reply; his face gave nothing away. She felt she should have been excited. She was not excited. Mrs. Redlake ran on precipitately:

"Of course, you haven't met him. Another H. B. Curious, isn't it? We've been kept quite busy wondering how we should distinguish between you, though, heaven knows, you're different enough! We're very fond of him, I may tell you," she added with an emphatic pressure of Ruth's hand. "I tell you that to begin with, because we've all decided that Dr.

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Bezuidenhout and he'll fight like dogs. He's a born Egyptologist, the Chief says, and awfully, dreadfully serious about it all. He'll hate your theories, H. B., so you may as well know it, first as last. They *are* different, aren't they?" She turned to Ruth for confirmation.

"Indeed they are," Ruth admitted, "but I'm sure they'll be friends."

She wasn't sure. In fact, she was sure that they couldn't be, and so was Mrs. Redlake.

"You'll have to bridge the gulf between them, Ruth," that lady continued anxiously. "By this time you must know what a terror this fellow is; he doesn't attempt to hide his feelings. That's what I told Mr. Bredon; he couldn't have found a safer or more uncompromising escort for you than H. B. if he'd searched all Egypt. He's inclined to be jealous, isn't he? Well, well! I don't blame him. Yes, that's the Luxor temple."

For suddenly, as the *arabieh* swerved round a corner on to the embankment road that fronts the Nile, Ruth saw on her right, so near that she could almost have touched them, the bulbous, fluted columns, with capitals shaped like a lotusbud, that sustain the massive architraves of Amenophis III. Grey, steadfast, perfect, they stood there in the morning light, the court, and Seti's colonnade behind it. Their shafts composed a solemn forest of stone; yet trees were mortal as mankind and pliable to stresses, while these dead masses still sustained, without a tremor, the weight which they had borne for nearly three thousand years. Their vastness and

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their strength made Ruth feel small and weak; their sheer antiquity made her giddily readjust her sense of time. Three thousand years ago, a thousand before the Romans came to Castel Ditches, those sandstone pillars had flung their challenge at time—time, which had reduced the Roman fortress to a smooth mound of earth—and still they stood in their triumphant perfection.

Her spirit abased itself before their permanence; yet, while she gazed, she was suddenly conscious of Bezuidenhout's unconcern, of his unspoken contempt, and, as she became aware of it, she felt no longer ashamed, but fiercely antagonistic. What right had he, a man whose mortality was already measured, to despise? "They are stones, dead stones," she seemed to hear him say. Stones that were more than stone, her heart answered hotly; stones that were symbols of the faith of man. But she knew that even if she had spoken her thought she could not have moved him, and this knowledge of his obdurateness hardened her heart against him, giving her the feeling of a happy release from an influence which, she told herself, she had always resented, although it had half enslaved her. Yesterday, in Cairo, she had been unable to argue against him. Here, in the standing stone of Luxor, rose an argument that even he, the sacrilegious destroyer, could not uproot with forces weaker than dynamite. Surely such a spectacle, she thought, must reduce him to silence. And, indeed, he was silent, even though his silence was rebellious.

At the landing-stage beneath the Winter Palace Hotel the

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expedition's *felucca* was moored. The river current and the upstream breeze between them sent the small craft scudding over olive green water which rippled from her bows with a gay chuckling sound. The plump form of Mrs. Redlake relapsed with a contented sigh into the stern.

"It's curious," she said, "the fascination of Thebes. The longer you live there the less you feel inclined to cross the river. Sometimes you feel that you simply must break away. Then, when you get to Luxor, and see the dragomen and those awful tourist women with their fat calves and dreadful knickerbockers exhibiting themselves on donkeys, you feel you can't ever be happy again till you get back to Thebes. . . . We're all of us the same. I suppose it's the what d'you call it . . . the psychic influence of the place," she added to Ruth, demanding sympathy.

"Laziness," said Bezuidenhout.

The word stung Ruth out of her dreaminess.

"You're not a lazy woman; anyone can see that," she answered quickly. "I'm sure I know exactly what you feel. I should feel just like that myself. There *is* an influence. I felt it go right through me when we passed that temple."

Bezuidenhout regarded her curiously with smiling eyes. She began to hate him.

"You needn't take any notice of *him*," said Mrs. Redlake blandly. "He's always like that. If you don't answer him he's powerless. Isn't that so, H. B.? And we love you just the same." She began to tell them disjointedly all the gossip of

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Thebes, using names that were only names to Ruth. Professor Wicken had gone up to Ed-fu in a *dahabieh* with some rich Americans. "Only three days ago he came up from Cairo; he ought to buy a season ticket." A row, a regular row, outside the tomb of Tut-ankh-amen. "Really the Antiquities Department is too terrible; but then, of course . . . We're getting dreadfully modern on this side," she continued, inconsequently. "Think of it, H. B.—three motor-cars. When we were young we never got beyond a sand-cart. Those nice Americans have a motor-wagonette and drive down in state on Tuesdays. And the dust they kick up! At Astill House we're still old-fashioned. I hope you're used to donkey-riding, Ruth?"

She wasn't quite sure about it; for though, as a child, she had ridden a horse at Castel Ditches, the short paces of this obstinate, mouse-coloured creature and its narrow, slippery saddle made her seat seem insecure. Bezuidenhout, whose animal seemed more spirited than the rest, was off like a flash. She watched him streaking on ahead; his legs almost touched the ground; for he rode long-stirrured, like a Boer farmer in a picture. Mrs. Redlake seemed equally at home, perched plumply on a dignified side-saddle. Ruth's donkey, on the other hand, announced his distaste for a stranger by an affected stupidity, suddenly standing stock still, and looking down his nose as though they were posing for an asinine picture and he was bored by it. It seemed as if she were going to be left disgracefully behind. She encouraged the donkey with reassuring sounds and words. It twitched its ears dis-

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dainfully, and yawned, pretending, like any nationalist student, that it didn't understand English. Then suddenly, almost disastrously, it started forward. The Astill House donkey-boy, who had been exchanging gossip with a boatman, had caught it a whack over the hindquarters. The donkey broke into a dust-raising canter; the donkey-boy ran padding softly beside it. His mouth was open; Ruth could see his pink tongue, his regular, white teeth. He looked up at her curiously and laughed as if he were enjoying the running and the dust. His brown eyes squinted and one was milky with old ophthalmia. His squinting glance was narrow and evil and old as Thebes.

Now she was so far behind them that the others looked like dots dancing in a cloud of dust. That didn't matter. She was happy to be alone in this radiant, crystal air. An irrigated meadow on her right burst into bloom; lilac and white and purple; poppies, millions of them—a field of opulent poppies growing thick as charlock. Their beauty ravished her; their somnolent, sour odour blew across the road. Rich land; rich and sleepy. What extravagant fancy had sown them there? Opium. Of course. Above them a lark sang.

The others had turned the corner of a mud-walled village and were lost; a compact, huddled village, houses glued close together like chambers of an ant-heap. Dishevelled fronds of date-palms shivered above the roofs. The fruit had been stripped from them; they were as plucked and jaded as the fowls that pecked and flurried and made love in the grey dust-mounds, littered with sugar-cane strippings, that

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surrounded the hovels. No other sign of life. A village sunk in a dull dream of poppy-fields.

Two irrigation channels met at a right-angle, tree-shadowed. The donkey took the corner walking, as though it would rather have dallied in the shade. That corner was alive with birds; sand-pipers, dipping delicately on the margin of muddy pools; pied hoopoes, driving their pick-shaped, crested heads into moist soil. A flash of malachite! That was the lustrous body of a bee-eater, tossed upward like a flirt of green flame, hawking for flies. Ruth heard the snip of its long beak in the air. Such was the silence.

The grey road straightened itself between acres of sugar-canes ringed like bamboos; all the fecundity of that deep soil rushing into greenness. The wind blew through them; they rustled, as if they were sighing with content for the Nile water that nourished their roots and the rich life that was in them. Then came the wheat-fields; no English wheat of her thin arable wore such a panoply of strength as this. Corn in Egypt. . . . And Bezuidenhout had said that Thebes was dead! Dead! Ask the crested larks that ran along the road before her, then rose, and fluttering soared to rain down living music that softened her heart and caught it upward to exult with them. Such life, such sheer abundance of joy in life, she had never breathed before. Compared with it the life she had known in England seemed misty and subdued, like the song of drowsy thrushes at sunset in July. . . .

Bezuidenhout had ridden off the map; from the farthest

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edge of the cornland Mrs. Redlake waved her fly-switch impatiently. She seemed a trifle annoyed as Ruth approached her, as if the donkey's behaviour were a reflection on the efficiency of her establishment. "I can't think what has happened to Barley-Sugar," she said, "I'm afraid he must be in one of his moods. You know, you get to think of them just as if they were human beings."

It was difficult for Ruth to explain to this affable stranger the nature of the meditations which had detained her; but Mrs. Redlake was readier to inform than to listen. "I thought I'd better wait for you," she said, "because the dogs in the village are frightening to a stranger, and those wretched people have no control over them. It's only the black grizzly ones that are dangerous; the yellow ones are awful cowards, and if you keep close to me you'll be all right. Barley-Sugar understands."

The donkey, his pessimism unmoved by the sound of his name, exactly followed in the foot-steps of Mrs. Redlake's, picking his way between fallen monoliths of sandstone, carved with hieroglyph, like a bicyclist steering between bottles at a gymkhana. "Fragments of the Ramasseum," Mrs. Redlake shouted back to Ruth.

The track climbed steadily. A shoulder of monstrous ruin rose between them and the corn-fields; and Ruth was quickly aware that the character of the ground had changed. Its colour was a dead and ashen grey, its surface as sterile and gritty as that of a city fowl-run, soft, shelving limestone, fractured and pulverised, from which the sun, which had

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exhilarated her in the cornland, now reflected dancing rays of light and heat which joined together to burn all life out of the air. No blade of grass to rest the eyes; no larks nor any other bird livened this wilderness, broken by mounds and pits like an abandoned mine-field. Some of the deeper pits were enclosed with iron railings and locked gates with numbers on them. Ruth guessed that these were tombs which had been already examined. These also must be tombs, these shallow recesses scooped in the friable rock like shelters which shepherds on Shropshire hillsides scooped for the lambing sheep in March. But neither the railed enclosures nor the rough pits seemed deader nor more tomb-like than the mud houses of the village through which they passed, glued to the catacombed cliff like cells of mason bees. It seemed incredible to Ruth that human beings could live in such a deathly desolation. That they did live there was certain. Within the mud-enclosures were middens of trampled refuse where flies buzzed in clouds and dusty sheep lay sweltering.

A bronze-coloured child ran out naked into the path and stared at her stupidly. Its eyes were like black diamonds sparkling through lids plastered with flies of which it took no notice. The sight filled Ruth with a sudden physical nausea; but, at that moment, a grizzly dog rushed out and threatened her legs with snarling teeth, frightening Barley-Sugar into a canter which brought her level with Mrs. Redlake.

"How can they live here?" she asked breathlessly, "how can they do it?"

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"They're quite contented. They've lived here for centuries. Every house is built about some abandoned tomb."

"But why . . . why?" Ruth protested. "What do they live on?"

"Sometimes they work in the irrigated land. Sometimes they work for the excavators. It's nice and dry up here. No mosquitoes. Practically no snakes. Not so many scorpions. All these unpleasant beasts want water."

"But, Mrs. Redlake, the filth, the flies! Did you see that child's eyes? And then, the awful sensation of living—did you really mean it?—in a deserted tomb!"

"My dear child, this is Egypt. All the children have ophthalmia. You can't prevent it. And as for tombs. . . . Well, you get used to that. You see here everything's so very dead that you simply can't believe it ever was alive. When you've been here a week, you'll think no more of it. Of course these villages are beastly; but we couldn't dig without them, so there it is. And nobody can say that the air isn't lovely here."

The donkeys strained upward, crossed the brow of a hill. Suddenly the vast cup of Dêr-el-Bahari gaped beneath them, a crucible in which air swam like the emanation of a white-hot metal. The breeze that had fanned them on the summit fell like a bird that drops dead as it flies over springs of fabulous miasma. There was no shade, no refuge anywhere. From the long double colonnades of Hatshepsut's temple, past horizontal lines of tomb-mouths, square, like pigeon-holes, the fluted bastions of hot, unscalable rock towered upward into an aching blue. Magnificent, but scornful of all

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life, the huge cup seemed to Ruth as hostile and sinister as the crater of a volcano. She shrank from it; but Mrs. Redlake, apparently, did not share her feelings.

"Dêr-el-Bahari," she murmured. "*Dear Dêr-el-Bahari*, how you get to love it! It's a shape you never get tired of; and when we go back to Europe in April it's extraordinarily how insignificant all other mountains seem. You see there's nothing beyond it. It's the end of all things. Literally nothing, you know. Thousands of miles of Sahara—I forget how many thousand. We'll ask the Chief; he'll tell us to an inch. Oh dear, I do want my breakfast!"

"There must be something wrong with them," Ruth thought, "if they can live here. Unless there's something wrong with me. I wonder what Hugh feels about it. . . ."

Mrs. Redlake was pointing with her fly-switch: "You see that dome? Well, that's Rockefeller House. Such charming people, and so entirely unpretentious. You're sure to love them. Our place is much humbler; the flat roof down on the left with the tent in front of it. And that's my husband in the white topee. He's talking to H. B. I'll bet they're up to their necks in 'shop' already. That's the worst of marrying an archæologist; his thoughts are always a couple of thousand years behind yours. Still, when all's said and done, it keeps them busy, which is the main thing in life. Don't you make any mistake, my dear, we'll keep you busy too!"

As they moved delicately down the slope Bezuidenhout disappeared into the house and the figure in the white topee moved to meet them. He smiled at his wife; helped Ruth

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down from her donkey, and shook her warmly by both hands. A kindly face, she thought. No wonder Mrs. Redlake seemed so bland and contented. Blue eyes, wide set and dreamy; a strong, hooked nose; a crooked mouth that smiled, very gently, above a beard sun-bleached to the colour of straw. Ruth felt at home with him at once.

"I mustn't keep you," he said. "Bredon, I know, is going off his head with anxiety to see you. Blanche, take Miss Morgan to Mr. Bredon's room before the poor fellow loses his reason."

"Our breakfast . . ." Mrs. Redlake began. "I was just thinking . . ."

"Breakfast, my dear! You talk of breakfast? I shouldn't have thought it of you. In our day . . ."

"Oh, well then, come along," said Mrs. Redlake good-humouredly, taking Ruth's arm in hers. They passed along a covered loggia on which a number of uniform doors and windows opened. At the end of it Mrs. Redlake stopped and whispered. "In there," she said. "Don't forget that you're hungry." Impulsively she kissed Ruth again; then left her.

II

A DOOR, WIRED with fly-netting, hazed the interior of the room. Her heart fluttered and raced. "May I come in?" she asked quietly.

"Yes; but close the door quickly; the flies are awful."

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The voice was weak and irritable. It was Hugh's voice, every tone and inflection familiar; and yet it seemed as though a stranger had spoken to her from a distance. It was not like the voice of a living man; its hollowness, its unnatural remoteness frightened her. Mechanically, beneath this flurry of alarm, her muscles obeyed his instruction. She opened the door of netting and closed it quickly behind her.

Bredon was lying propped up with pillows on a narrow iron bedstead. His fine hands lay limply outstretched upon the counterpane. His face was pale and elongated, it seemed to her, and out of its long pallor his dark eyes burned into hers. For a moment she stood stock still, shocked by the fragile transparency of his face. Then his lips parted; he spoke again, as though the effort of articulation exhausted him.

"At last, my darling . . ."

"Hugh, my poor love. . . . Oh, Hugh . . ."

Straightway, as by a miracle, they were in each other's arms, their cheeks, their eyes, their lips pressed close together. The heat of his body burned through the silk pyjama-jacket on to her naked forearms which were cool and strong about him, spending their strength for his support, gladly, passionately giving. For a long while they did not speak. There was no need for speech; and, indeed, she could not have spoken, for the unspent emotion of many months of waiting choked her. As they clung there together the wheel of time rolled backward, heaving her out of reach of her material surroundings. That strange, bare little room, iso-

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lated in the burning cup of Dêr-el-Bahari, faded and was lost; the various bright memories of her long journey grew dim. Nothing remained real but the beloved figure whom she held and cherished in her arms; her child; her darling; Hugh . . . the reason of her existence. In this renewal of tenderness, transcending time or space, she found, inexplicably, that she was crying. For joy, she thought; and was not ashamed of it; she knew that he, being part of her, would understand the fullness of her heart.

How long they clung together in this mute content she did not know. The journey was over; her tired body and spirit had need of rest. She lay there dreamily, her tears slowly subsiding, determined not to allow herself the disturbance of thought or feeling. They were alone in the quietude of that remote room; beyond its netted door the sun-subdued silence of the desert surrounded them; a sweet and deathlike silence through which their own lives flowed quietly, like a hidden stream. Suddenly, as though her ears had been stopped and were opened, Ruth became aware of sound; a shrill, quavering call that made her shiver; a high, aerial sound that quivered like the tongues of snakes and flickered wildly through her brain. With it the world came back to her. Like a roused animal she started up in alarm.

"What's that? What is it?" she cried.

"Ruth, whatever's the matter?"

He went pale; he was as startled as herself.

"That sound? What is it? Tell me quickly, or I shall think I've gone mad."

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He smiled, recovering from his surprise, but still his lips trembled.

"You must have fallen asleep and dreamed it. No wonder. You're tired."

"No, no . . . I can hear it still. Listen, Hugh, listen! It's in the air, high up. It frightens me!"

He shook his head perplexedly. "You're still dreaming, my sweet. I can hear nothing." Suddenly his face brightened. "Good lord, yes! I know what you mean now. It's the kites screaming. Probably the servants have thrown out some refuse from the kitchen. They fly screaming about all day; I'm so used to the sound that I never hear them. Great, bold, mottled fellows. They're our commonest bird, though funnily enough, you don't find their pictures in the tombs . . . only the falcons—Horus—which are getting rare."

She did not listen to him. Kites. . . . After all, it seemed, she wasn't going mad. Kites . . . How ridiculous! But it wasn't the kites she had heard. What she had heard was the marriage-cry of veiled women fluttering out from the carved balconies around the Mosque of Weeping; a cry that had nothing to do with her own marriage or with Hugh; one that belonged not to him, but to Bezuidenhout, and had power to recall not only the poison which had burned through her blood in Bezuidenhout's company, but that other shameful emotion of the Marseilles train. Even while she lay in Hugh's arms that sound had power to move her, to leave her shaken, so that, for the moment, the presence of her lover had no meaning. And who should say that this

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was not some kind of madness? Hugh was speaking to her. Not even his words had meaning. Somehow she must regain her sanity.

"Really, my sweet," he told her, "you must warn me if you're going to take fright at things like that. You jumped up as though you'd been stung by a scorpion. Remember I'm an invalid. You must make allowances for nerves."

In that moment he looked so gentle and pathetic in his reproaches that she had to cover her guilt by a new embrace. "You poor, poor darling, did I startle you? Why, your dear forehead is quite damp!"

"The heat," he said. "It's beginning to stoke up. I think the wind must have gone round to the South. *Khamsin's* no fun, I can tell you. Ruth, if you knew how wonderful it is to have you here!"

He kissed her softly; his thin hands took possession of her. Melted by his tenderness and the countless memories that it recalled, her heart was rid of ghostly preoccupations. She loved him. How could she ever have doubted it? She had never doubted; that she could swear before God. He was ill and gentle and pitiful and her own. Of pity alone there was enough to fill her to the exclusion of any other emotion. She had come to him, after months of separation; she had found him defeated and suffering and failed in her duty toward him. Not duty; only love. And she must make amends, humble herself for his forgiveness.

"Hugh, I'm a brute to have been so thoughtless," she told him, "I think I must have lost my senses to behave as sillily

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as that. Tell me about yourself, darling. This stupid cold . . . you're nearly better?"

"I've never been really ill. It's nothing. I told them so from the beginning. Of course Mrs. Redlake's a dear, but she's most frightfully fussy. I think she gloats over getting an invalid in the house. I got a bit of a cold. The dust, you know. As a matter of fact, you don't know; but you soon will. They sent over for the doctor from the Winter Palace. Of course, being a doctor, he had to justify his existence and kept me in bed. And here I am, sweating and growing weaker every day, while I might just as well have gone to meet you at Port Said. What did you feel like when you got my letter?"

"Oh, utterly lost. My child, don't talk about it."

It was the subject which she wished to avoid above all others, but he persisted.

"Of course they said you'd be all right with Bezuidenhout. The whole damned expedition seems cracked on their H. B. I hope he came up to their expectations. What is he like?"

She smiled: "Why, just about as different from you as it'd be possible to imagine."

"That's what I gathered. The Redlakes treat him as a joke; but from all I hear of his opinions I feel I should dislike him. You'd dislike anyone you hadn't seen if people went on chattering about him as they do. Still, I suppose he was better than nothing."

"We didn't quarrel, if that's what you mean."

"Was it as bad as that?" he asked suspiciously. "You see

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how stupid they are. We should have had an afternoon in Cairo. There were several things bearing on my work that I wanted to look up in the museum. That was my opportunity. Of course he took you there?"

"No. We were tired. We decided . . ."

"Good God, Ruth! You mean to say you missed the museum? You could have taken a cab and got there in a quarter of an hour. Sakkara's too far. I suppose you did the usual thing and drove out to the Pyramids? What did you think of them?"

He waited eagerly for her reply. She couldn't lie to him.

"We didn't go there either," she confessed.

He sat up restlessly in the bed. "Then what in heaven's name did you do?"

"We went a walk . . . through the Mouski, I think. I don't know what we did. After that we had tea at Shepherd's; and then it was time to go to the station."

"A walk?" he repeated with compressed lips. "I thought you said you were tired?" His manner was forensic.

"Oh, Hugh dear, can't you understand? Our legs weren't tired. It was our brains that were fuddled. We didn't want—it's no good trying to explain—we didn't want to see dead things in a museum. We didn't . . ."

"Dead?" he interrupted her. "What do you mean?"

"Freedom. We wanted to breathe and feel we were alive after being cooped up in stuffy cabins. Don't you see?"

"The voice is the voice of Bezuidenhout," he answered, "I

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can recognize it from what they've told me. Ruth, I thought you were stronger than that. I didn't think you could be so easily influenced. It isn't like you."

"I wasn't influenced," she declared. "He asked me what I'd like to do. He proposed museums. I said I'd rather not go there. You've no right. . . . You mustn't blame him. If you want to blame me you can do so."

"I couldn't blame you. I love you," he answered, with a sudden disarming simplicity. "Only I don't understand. I always think of you as being exactly like myself. Ruth, I've not hurt you, my darling?" Again his face, which feeling had illuminated, grew pale and pitiful.

"Oh, Hugh!"

Once more, as though kisses were a specific against all difference, she sought refuge in his arms. Why should we waste time, she thought, in talking about Bezuidenhout? He was outside them, a stranger, incapable of influencing their love. Her life was Hugh's. She had chosen. Against the confirmed security of that choice, the core of her existence, Bezuidenhout's destructive intelligence might spend its strength in vain. Passionately, again and again, she affirmed their united inviolability, until it became an article of faith, and then, at last, she knew that she was happy, believed that she was unafraid.

With deliberate devices she strengthened her illusion, trying to detach herself and Hugh from their surroundings and think herself back into the magical Spring of Castel Ditches. With her lips upon his cheek she whispered of familiar

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things which they had known together and which bound her to him. She spoke of Diana's bitterness. Poor Diana! It was easy to smile and be charitable at a distance of three thousand miles. She spoke of Frank, the cowman; of Dr. Hendrie, of John Morgan. She recalled their day of wonder; the vinous cowslip meadows; the flakes of wild cherry-snow that had drifted down upon their first embrace. She tried to take Hugh in her arms and woo his spirit backward out of the glare of Egypt and the whinney of wheeling kites into a state which she knew, and of which she was sure, the lost Eden to which they could never return. And he, seduced by her warm presence, allowed himself to share in her willed illusion, regaining, on her lips, if not that primal ecstasy another that was as moving.

A soft step of bare feet in the loggia broke their hallucination. Their laughing whispers ceased. They separated; and as Ruth's fingers restored the disorder of her hair a white-robed smiling Berberine entered with a tray of breakfast.

"The Sitt says that the lady must eat," he explained as he rattled down the china; and on his heels, like a fresh breeze, came Mrs. Redlake.

"As soon as you've finished eating," she said, "I must drag you away. Doctor's orders. Then, if you'll take my advice, you'll go and lie down. Even if you don't sleep the rest will do you good. H. B. has disappeared already."

The mention of Bezuidenhout's name awakened Hugh to the grievance that he had forgotten.

"They had the whole afternoon in Cairo and he never took

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her near the museum," he said. "What do you think of that?"

Mrs. Redlake laughed. "Only that it's exactly like him. But he did what we wanted. He brought her here, all right." Her capable, plump fingers grasped Ruth's arm. It was half a gesture of instinctive kindness, half a reminder that it was time to go. But Hugh was not so easily evaded.

"I ought to be getting up to-day," he announced, with a challenging determination. "You think I don't know what's happening outside: but I do. They're working away at my new tomb and I should be there. I oughtn't to miss the opening. I've a right to superintend. The Chief knows I've a right. You can tell him so from me. After all, I discovered it. I shall get up after lunch."

"Now, Bredon, do, for goodness sake, behave!" Mrs. Redlake entreated. "You know as well as I do that we can't take the law into our own hands without the doctor's permission. You had a temperature last night."

"I've no temperature now," Hugh grumbled.

"You and your wretched tombs! Hankering after dynastic ladies when you've got Ruth here! Now, listen, Bredon, the doctor's orders are you're to stay in bed, so that's that. Now do be sensible. We're going. If you young people want to say good-bye I'll turn my back."

They left him. The parting kiss was absent-minded. Leaving the gauze-shadowed room they passed through a patch of painful sunlight to the bedroom on the other side of the house that had been allotted to Ruth. There, in her bright,

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business-like way, Mrs. Redlake deposited her, with an apology.

"You may find it a bit noisy at first," she said; "the workshed and stores are just behind you. As a matter of fact, they aren't very busy there just now, and when you're married, the room you'll have will be delightful. Lie down now, make yourself comfortable and sleep well. If there's anything you want . . ."

She paused, seeing the question in Ruth's eyes.

"If you can spare me one moment. . . ." Ruth began.

"Of course I can. What is it?"

"This illness of Hugh's. I want you to tell me the truth about it. You needn't spare me anything. I'm used to facing facts. I don't know if he's told you how dangerously ill he was when we first met. He very nearly died, and I nursed him. So you see . . . Mrs. Redlake, you know it's no good asking me to make myself comfortable until that's settled?"

"No, my dear child, you're right, your perfectly right. But I can't tell you much. You know how terribly secretive doctors are. When first he was taken ill, about a week ago, we thought he had just an ordinary cold. The dust gets in your throat. Then he had fever. I always take their temperatures. The doctor wouldn't commit himself; they never will. And this ridiculous temperature is hanging on. Now he's been thoroughly examined, there's some talk about lungs. No need for alarm, you know. Nothing really definite. . . ."

"It was definite enough before. He had pleurisy. Pleurisy with effusion."

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"So he told the doctor. That's what put him on his guard; made him a bit suspicious; and that's why he insists on keeping him in bed until the fever clears up. Of course we go on talking gaily about his going back to work; but that, as a matter of fact, will be quite out of the question for some time to come."

"And our marriage?"

"That too. For a time at any rate. A short time, we'll hope. There's no need to take a gloomy view of it, my dear. It only means . . ." She hesitated.

"It means that I'm here on false pretences."

"No, no, it means nothing of the sort. Don't be ridiculous."

"If I hadn't started, you'd have stopped me coming."

"We should have done nothing of the sort. We didn't consider it serious."

"But if it continues, I can't possibly stay here, Mrs. Redlake."

"What nonsense! I don't know what you're talking about. Now that we know you we're delighted to have you. The fact that you're here will cheer him enormously and distract him from thinking all the time about his work. That's the main trouble. It's a positive obsession with him."

"I feel, all the same," said Ruth, "that I've no right to stay here. I ought to go over to Luxor to one of the hotels."

"And leave us to nurse your blessed invalid? No, thank you! Now that we've got you, we shall keep you to your duty." She laughed, then, with a sudden, half maternal tenderness, she laid her hands on Ruth's shoulders. "That's not

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the real reason," she admitted. "We want to keep you because we're fond of Hugh, quite apart from the fact that the Chief finds him exceptionally valuable, and because, with you as well, it's a case of liking at first sight. At this time of year, after three months at Thebes, we get a little stale, and though we're not supposed to have visitors, we're really glad of the opportunity of seeing a new face. Particularly when it's like yours. You see?"

She kissed Ruth's forehead quickly, shyly, as though she were ashamed of being demonstrative, and then destroyed the effect of tenderness with a laugh that seemed to mock it. "So now you know you're welcome," she said. "He'll soon be better, and you'll both be married and off my hands. So that's all right. Good-bye. Sleep well. If you're still sleeping I won't call you for lunch."

She went. Along the tiled corridor her determined footfall died away. Ruth closed her eyes. The lids quivered with tiredness, and yet she knew that she could not sleep; not for the strangeness of the room, which was dim, monastic, and reasonably cool like Hugh's, but because it seemed to her that her position in space, the whole relation of her mind and her senses to their surroundings, had been changed as effectively as if she had been smitten by some obscure disease, in which the values of thought and sensation were altered, so that these processes were no longer reliable; an inco-ordination, an ataxy of the soul. In this new state of mind and body there was no more reality. Even her love for Hugh which, ten days before, she would have declared to be the

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most real thing in her existence, seemed vague and questionable; its outline blurred, its substance deliquescent, like those of the ponderable rocks of Dêr-el-Bahari which she had seen that morning swimming through hot air. By sheer concentration of her tired mind she tried to grasp and fix these formless impressions in a ballast of stark words that should weigh her down to earth. She formulated them as brutally, as coldly as she could:

"I am here in Egypt, in Thebes, in Astill House, the unwanted guest of strangers who pretend that they like me. Why am I here? Because Hugh sent for me. But Hugh is ill; much iller than he knows or they dare to tell me. I shall nurse him again; but probably he will die and we shall never marry. We are quite helpless, both of us. Love? Even love cannot help us now. So what is left for me? Selfless devotion, sacrifice; those are the noblest expressions of which the human spirit is capable; I should be humbly proud to accept such a charge. In England, perhaps. Why England? The world is small enough; what is the difference?"

Her reason told her there was none but could not persuade her. That difference she had felt from the moment that her donkey picked its way through the prone monoliths of the Ramasseum on to the sterile riddled limestone of the mortuary city. That first impression had fixed the hateful stamp of a perpetual negation upon her. This was the meaning of the numbness, the sense of futility that bound her heart and mocked her with its denials. What power, what validity had love or pride or humility or any human aspiration against

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this panoply of death made manifest in imperishable stone? Why should she struggle to assert herself against its sublime and chilling knowledge of the vanity of all human endeavour? For it could answer her with a single word.

"I am mad," she thought, "to give way like this. My mind is too tired to deal with it." She protested like a child, pitifully: "It isn't fair. Why should I be pestered like this? I won't allow myself to think. I've never thought of things like this before. Besides, I am a Christian; I must have faith. Faith, Hope, Love . . . Love . . . oh, my darling, why did they separate us? I need you more dreadfully than ever you needed me. If I were with you I think I could forget."

She rose from her bed in desperation, determined, somehow, to find her way through the strange house to Hugh's room. Doctor's orders. And how, if she encountered anyone, should she explain herself? Through the partition wall that divided her room from the workshop she heard the murmur of a level voice dictating, the feverish click of a typewriter transcribing notes. Overhead, in the white sky, wild kites wheeled and whinnied. That took her mind back to Bezuidenhout, his keen, grave eyes, his confident smile.

"What a little fool he'd think me!" she said.

III

CERTAINLY IT was a bad beginning. Yet, after a day or two at Astill House, Ruth's normality asserted itself so triumphantly that she had almost forgotten it. That night, in spite

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of the excitement of her arrival, Hugh's temperature fell and with that fall his spirits rose to a reassuring level. His feverish querulousness, which had been a symptom of frustration rather than of disease, immediately disappeared. With renewed confidence all the old buoyant enthusiasms returned and his suspicions vanished. For Ruth he was no longer a pitiful invalid but a lover, and in his convalescence the raptures of Castel Ditches were recovered.

The very suddenness of the change transported her. All her surroundings, which at first had alarmed and distressed her, took on new colours. The unfailing sunshine, that, on the day of her arrival, had seemed a foretaste of perpetual torment, became a very source of life and of hope. Each morning she opened her eyes to its incredible constancy; each morning its gaiety revived and inspired her, sweeping serenely through that crystalline air. She thought: "No wonder Hugh's ancient Egyptians worshipped the sun."

And then the beauty of the bastions of Dêr-el-Bahari, those rocks that were changeless yet never seemed the same, began to dawn on her. At every moment of the day or night in which she beheld them those cliffs surprised her with some new loveliness. Sometimes they seemed as stark and solemn and terrible as on their first encounter, filling her with awe, but never now with terror; for now she knew that this was only one of their protean disguises; that mid-day would show them sleeping in an æstivation on which the very violence of light flattened and destroyed the colour which light created; that sunset, dying in the desert of Arabia, would soften their

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contours with hues of ethereal lilac or make them glow and burn like one rich rose; that swift sub-tropical nightfalls would veil them—sometimes with a darkness that had the illuminating quality of light, sometimes with palpable Egyptian darkness, the darkness that could be felt, a veil beneath which their shapes rested uneasily, motionless yet alive. But such darkness was rare in those pellucid windless skies. Usually, when she saw the mountain at night on her way to bed, its crest rose clear against the brilliant North-Western sky, drinking in starlight, conscious and motionless; a stone flower, she thought, on whose petals some hanging star might settle like a firefly.

Slowly, reluctantly, she was seduced by that shape which ancient Thebes had chosen to keep watch over its dead. She did not confess her new infatuation to Hugh; for Hugh, in the ardour of convalescence, had thoughts for nothing but the work that was still denied him, reading, or expounding to her from morning till night the Proceedings and Transactions of various Egyptological bodies with which the Expedition library was well supplied. She was almost ashamed of it until she discovered that she was not alone; that nearly every member, even the most unlikely, of the North Bromwich Expedition, was enthralled and hypnotized in the same way as herself.

“Did you see the *gebel* this evening?” one would ask at dinner. And then it seemed as if everyone had seen it, and not only seen it but loved it, each being sensitive as herself to its infinite variety of moods.

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This knowledge would have made her feel more at home with them if that had been necessary. It was not. Never in all her life had she encountered a group of human beings more sympathetic or harmonious. Perhaps, in her case, the distressing accident of Hugh's illness claimed and received their sympathy. But the harmony was another matter. It seemed to her amazing that a community of individuals—six men and four women—could live in such isolation and intimacy without discord. She fancied, extravagantly, that it was nothing but their common and secret adoration of the mountain's beauty that composed their differences, but might, in fact, have found a simpler explanation and a truer; that this astonishing concord emanated, more than anyone suspected, and least of all themselves, from the personalities of Steven Redlake, the Director, and his wife.

On her first meeting Ruth had been able to appreciate Mrs. Redlake's frank good-humour, but first impressions had done less than justice to her husband. This undistinguished figure of middle height with the brown, sun-bleached beard, the kindly eyes and smiling, twisted mouth; so unemphatic yet so definite; so quiet, yet so wise; so remote and yet so human, carried the responsibility of the entire expedition on his shoulders. He inspired and directed all its activities, social, administrative and scientific, without a wasted word. Omniscient, short-spoken, yet curiously diffident to the thoughts and feelings of others, he sweetened all their relations by an essential goodness which, as by some magical virtue of contact, could be communicated through the medium

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of his wife. On her first evening Mrs. Redlake took Ruth aside.

"I expect you're surprised to find what a happy family we are," she told her tactfully. "Visitors always distrust our good manners, and go away suspecting that we fight like cats when we're alone. But we don't, you know; I suppose we simply couldn't at such close quarters. A storm in a teacup's a tornado for the tea-leaves. It wouldn't do. It would make hell for everybody. So we take careful records of each other's corns and never tread on them. If you have any particular weaknesses, you'd better confess them. I'll tell you Mrs. Southwold's straight away. She cannot *bear* anyone looking at her letters; not even the outside of them. So do be awfully careful when the mail comes in. Then Mrs. Nash. . . . She's really the most sweet-tempered creature, but only after half-past ten in the morning. It's more than your life's worth to speak to her at breakfast, because, you see, you might make a joke, and at that time of the day she can't see one and resents it. After lunch she has a delightful sense of humour. Oh yes, there's one thing more. The food over here is sometimes perfectly awful; you never can rely on these Berberines. But don't, for heaven's sake, ever remark on it in public, even if it chokes you, because poor Mr. Macadam is responsible and awfully sensitive. Just tell me privately. When first we came here the women used to housekeep in turns. It was disastrous. Then the Chief had a brilliant inspiration and handed over the housekeeping to the eldest bachelor. No female jealousies, you see; and Mr. Macadam, being a Scots-

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man, is most economical and specializes on oatmeal porridge. You'll see for yourself how well the whole business works."

Ruth saw how well it worked. She also saw how keenly the Redlakes watched for the first flicker of any difficulty and by a word or a smile extinguished it. Both of the married women were kind to her, for the fact of her approaching admission to their state aroused their interest. Mrs. Southwold, whose letters must not be looked at, was a vivid, wiry little woman from North Bromwich, with a black-country accent and a tigerish devotion to her husband, the Expedition photographer a lanky, red-haired fellow whom she bullied in private. Southwold appeared to thrive upon this fare. His function as a recorder of physical appearances kept him busy all day, and sometimes far into the night. Ruth rarely spoke to him except at meal-times, though often, gazing through Hugh's netted window, she would see him stalking about the building, his black focussing-cloth draped round his shoulders, like a ceremonial vestment, a native carrying his unwieldy camera in the rear.

Mrs. Nash, who must not be spoken to before half-past ten, was very different from Mrs. Southwold. Mrs. Nash was a lady. She didn't proclaim it in so many words. She implied it, subtly, by suggesting that Ruth was one also. She was a tall, fair woman, with thin, aristocratic ankles, of which she was inordinately proud. She always dressed in white, and left exposed an area of flat and bony chest, whose almost disconcerting pallor she protected, during the sunny hours, with folds of chiffon, and adorned with a mummy necklace of

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uncut stones. She had a boy at Oxford. One could hardly believe it! She didn't. . . .

Her husband, Nash, the chemist, was her physical complement; a stocky, swarthy man, square and clean-shaven, with the physique of a fighter and a cultivated, contradictorily melodious voice. Neither he nor Southwold had much time to spare for sociability; for Redlake, by his quiet concentration, kept them busy; but both were natural and friendly to Ruth, accepting her, from the first, with a kind of brotherly familiarity which didn't in the least absolve them from politeness. From their enquiries she judged that they were equally friendly toward Hugh.

More complicated, and therefore more intriguing, was the figure of Mr. Macadam, the housekeeper. He was tall, thin, austere, excessively formal, with a long, ludicrously jutting nose, and fine, but sceptical blue eyes, whose earnestness was so penetrating and disconcerting that even Mrs. Nash grew diffident before him, instinctively veiling her white square of chest. Apart from the absent Hugh, he was the only bachelor in the party, and as such might have been regarded as a fit subject for mothering; but not even Mrs. Redlake had ever dared to mend his socks. No doubt he mended them himself; for he was always clothed with the greatest propriety in a black suit and a high stiff collar. In these unsuitable garments he could be seen flapping about like an officious undertaker among the excavations which he superintended through the heat of the day. Redlake respected him for his knowledge and reliability. The others treated him as an eccentric, but

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respected him too. Strangely enough, the only people with whom he seemed entirely at ease were Bezuidenhout, with whom he was working, and Ruth; a curious, triangular relationship; for since he had cantered away from her and Mrs. Redlake by the Ramasseum, Bezuidenhout had scarcely honoured her with a look or a word.

Yet he was there. At mealtimes she was enormously aware of his presence, and, since he did not look at her, tempted to examine him. He was absorbed, and evidently tired. He and Macadam were working at high pressure, unwinding, dissecting, the season's accumulation of mummies; noting the fashion of the linen bands, the methods of embalmment; recording minute natural and pathological variations; measuring the capacity, proportions and facial angles of skulls, before those which were unremarkable, descended, with the torn linen that had encased them, to a limbo of broken bodies in a neighbouring tomb which even the Arab scavengers knew better than to explore.

Mrs. Nash had explained to her, without recognizing it, the ghoulish nature of their employment. To her it was nothing; all in the day's work. But Ruth, in hearing, had felt a shudder of spiritual discomfort. She had never seen a mummy except one which Hugh had shown her in the North Bromwich Museum: a wisp of dark hair and a lipless, sardonic mouth grinning above yellow windings in its erect sarcophagus. That travesty of a human face, leering through its glazed window, had sometimes haunted her memory. The more intimate contact of the investigator horrified her. It was

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horrible to imagine that these two, the silent Scotsman and Bezuidenhout who came in late to meals together, could eat with hands that, five minutes before, had been foul with mortality. They were like lean vultures, to whose feathers clung the odour of death.

"But really, there's nothing to it," Mrs. Nash assured her. "Poor things, they're so dreadfully shrivelled, so very dead, that it's quite impossible to feel any emotion about them."

"I suppose you're right," she answered: "I've got to get used to it. At first it gives one a shock. Don't you find it so? Or rather *didn't* you?"

Mrs. Nash shook her delicate head and smiled; and, as she did so, Ruth had a vision of the alabaster chest of Mrs. Nash turned to dry parchment, of her necklace returned to the darkness out of which it had momentarily emerged; and, with that vision, as often in those days, a sense of the futility of physical life and beauty—even though the chest of Mrs. Nash, for all her sunburn-creams and powders was not beautiful—annihilated her. She wanted comforting, she wanted explanation.

"You see," she went on thoughtfully, "it seems to me that life in this place has two divided layers: the awfully pleasant one in which we're knitting jumpers and talking, with sunshine outside and a nice tent to shelter us; and then the other one, all round us, underneath us, in which the men are working. At any time the division might give way; and then we should find ourselves"—she laughed at her own appositeness—"with one foot in the grave."

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"But surely that's unhealthy," Mrs. Nash assured her, adjusting her chiffon. "How can you dream of things like that in this gorgeous sunshine? Just think of Middlesex at this moment and be thankful. Imagine knitting in the shade in England in January! Ruth, you're too bad, you've made me drop a stitch. What was I saying? Oh, Thebes. Well, I, at any rate, adore it. You see I love the heat. My father was Chief Justice of Trinidad, you know."

So Ruth had been informed, a thousand times; but it had nothing to do with her bewilderment.

"Then you don't feel like that. Never? Honestly?"

"Never, I love it. Dear old Dêr-el-Bahari. . . ."

Ruth knew all about Dêr-el-Bahari. "But the men must feel differently. They don't live this artificial life."

"Too busy to think about such things," Mrs. Nash decided. "Harold certainly doesn't, or I'm sure he'd have told me. I'm sure he's far too healthy to feel anything."

But Macadam did. So she learned when she asked him point-blank in one of his shy approaches. He was the only person whom she felt confident to question, for Hugh, poor Hugh, was not to be disturbed in his convalescence, and Bezuidenhout pointedly, inexplicably avoided her.

"You're right, Miss Morgan," he answered, in his clipped Glasgow Scots. "The fact that you feel it shows that you're sensitive, if I hadn't guessed it already. Will you have any Celtic blood in your veins? Shropshire? Well, that's the border." He lowered his voice, as though he were whispering a discreditable secret. "When first I came here—it'll be four

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years ago—I thought my nairves wouldn't stand it. It wasn't the handling of things, you'll understand, so much as their omni-presence—if I may use that word apart from its religious associations—to put it shortly, the way they had of stifling you. I used to stand watching the gangs at work clearing the mummy pits, with my eyes and mouth so full of dust you couldn't speak or swallow. The Dust of Death; that's how I used to think of it. I have a weakness for phrases. And when I woke at night and heard the jackals yowling, I'd feel my limbs going cold. I'm not exaggerating. I'd feel that then and there I'd got to get out of it on to the other side of the river. I know it; it's no joke. I sympathize with you."

"And now," she asked, "you feel nothing?"

"I feel it less."

"Why?"

He laughed drily. "Influence of place. I'm Scotch. Probably superstitious. I suppose it means that I've given up fighting against it. Accepted it. Become half dead myself. You'll admit I haven't struck you as over-lively?"

She didn't answer his smiling question. "Well, I don't think I could bear to be beaten," she said.

"Then you're like H. B. I congratulate you. You ought to be friends; form an offensive and defensive alliance. H. B.'s a wonderful person. They treat him as a joke here; but he's no joke, I can assure you."

She answered nothing, wondering if he would tell Bezuidenhout what she had said. Evidently he didn't, or, if he

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did, Bezuidenhout took no notice of his suggestion, for he remained as wilfully remote from her as before. She continued to watch him. She saw how easily, how familiarly he joked with the other women, till Mrs. Southwold became loud-voiced and broadly Midland, and the necklace on Mrs. Nash's chest danced with delight. But if Ruth were in their company he avoided them, so markedly that Mrs. Redlake, whose eyes were always on her flock, noticed the distance and tried, unsuccessfully, to draw them together.

"I can't think why you don't get on better with H. B.," she said. "He's such a dear when once you get to know him. I should have imagined that travelling together like that you'd have made friends. You must have choked him off in some way."

"I'm sure I didn't," Ruth told her. "I think I like him."

"Then why do you always avoid him like this?"

"He avoids me."

"Ridiculous! I'll speak to him about it," Mrs. Redlake declared.

"Oh, don't do that, for heaven's sake," Ruth hurriedly protested.

"You sound as if you were afraid of him. H. B.'s the straightest and safest person living."

Ruth became scarlet. "Please, please, don't suggest anything of that kind."

"I don't," said Mrs. Redlake. "But it's odd. Ruth, I'm convinced that you haven't told me everything. Some mis-

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understanding that I might put right. Something that happened in Cairo."

"Nothing happened in Cairo . . . except that we didn't go to the museum."

"Surely all that's forgotten and forgiven?"

It was not: and for this, perhaps, Ruth had reason to be thankful that Bezuidenhout avoided her. Whenever his name was mentioned Hugh's eyes went dark, his lips hardened, his mind recoiled on ancient, indefinite grudges. His attitude was so unreasonable and perverse that Ruth, in whom loyalty and charitableness were instinctive, found herself rising again and again in Bezuidenhout's defence, not because she felt tenderly towards him, but because he was absent and could not defend himself.

"You cannot talk like that," she said, "about a man you've never seen."

"As if that made any difference!" Hugh maintained. "I've heard enough about him from others to form an opinion. He's a nihilist, subversive, a kind of modern Akhnaton. He's no business here. Of course you've had opportunities of knowing him; yet even you can say nothing to make me change my opinion."

"He's very keen on his work, everyone admits that, and very good at it."

"So much the worse. If he were a fool he wouldn't be dangerous."

"And everybody likes him. Not only the Redlakes . . . everybody."

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"I know that kind of popularity. If you set yourself to get round people it's easy enough. Apparently you've fallen a victim to it at once."

She laughed. "My child, if only you knew! He hardly ever speaks to me."

Hugh pounced eagerly upon the opportunity for another grievance.

"He doesn't speak to you, and yet you take all this trouble to defend him! Why the devil doesn't he? I'll tell you. He means to insult me through you. Because you're going to be my wife, and some of these tattling women have told him what I've said about his opinions. Well, well, I'm not ashamed of mine. I'm perfectly ready to maintain them to his face, as he'll discover when we meet. I promise you I've no intention of mincing words. Ruth, you're not listening to me. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I'm listening. Only, if you get worked up like this, my darling, you'll lose the ground you've gained, and never meet him at all. Why should you disturb yourself like this? It's wicked of you."

After these fretful outbursts she found herself involved in passionate reconciliations. Day by day the strength which fever had sapped was returning. During her first week at Thebes he had been easily tired, too tired even to love her; all their love-making had been shadowed and perilous; but now that Mrs. Redlake's temperature chart maintained its regularity, his kisses were no longer full of ghostly admonitions. All the old physical charm which disease had dimmed reasserted itself. She loved him. In their love there

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was nothing reserved or sinister. He was more frankly passionate than ever he had been before. They were happy, hopeful, unpreoccupied; impatient, both, for the wedding which the doctor from the Winter Palace still prudently postponed.

And Hugh was never idle. Even in the first feebleness of convalescence she had been impressed by the keen vitality of his mind. Comparing him with the other members of the Expedition whom she met in the hostel dining-room, she was thrilled to realize the delicacy and vigour of her lover's brain, his firm and fine determination to make himself master of his subject. His thirst for knowledge was so greedy, his mind so clear and penetrating, his enthusiasm so potent, that even in the desert of Egyptology his companionship was a delight.

He fired her interest; he made her eager to know the significance of this art which enthralled so many different imaginations, to reverence its magnificence, to realize its beauty. He was angelically patient in his explanations, not only because he loved her, but because he took pride in the quickness and sensitiveness of her intelligence, and exposition organized his ideas.

Hour after hour they sat in his monastic bedroom, most sweetly conscious of each other's presence, while Hugh, with illustrated text-books taken from the Expedition library, expounded the history and æsthetic of the periods that he loved. And Ruth, with a virgin pliancy of mind and a sense of beauty that as yet had hardly been awakened, was

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so transported with her own wonder and his delight in it, so absorbed, so anxious to share in everything that could make their unity more complete, that her old instinctive dread and dislike of the tomb-riddled city seemed ignorant and childish, melting away beneath the light of science. Now, in Hugh's reassuring company, she was ashamed ever to have harboured such superstitions; she thanked heaven that she had freed herself, finally, from their influence. It seemed, indeed, as if a new and saner life were beginning. The light, the clarity of the unclouded Theban sky were symbols of her confidence. Another fortnight, the doctor said. Another fortnight . . . providing . . .

Ruth had no doubts of Providence. Only at night, when she had kissed Hugh and left him and passed along the corridors to her bedroom, a faint aroma of Boer tobacco, hanging on the still night air, brought to her heart a chilly reminder of Bezuidenhout, unaccountably sinister. She laughed at herself. In all their company there was nobody less sinister or more plain-sailing than he. She tried to dismiss not him but his associations from her mind. It was impossible. Right up till midnight, through the thin wall that separated her from the workshop, she heard the deep rumour of his level voice. The typewriter which clicked down notes was supported on the lean knees of Macadam. Sometimes the voice and the typewriter stopped; and then came other sounds of ponderous objects being moved. . . . What were they?

But what, in any case, did they matter? Bezuidenhout,

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as everyone told her but himself, was working against time. He was off to America. A Dollar Line boat would take him from Port Said. The harder he worked the surer he would be of catching it. What did it mean to her, whether he caught or missed it?

IV

“ADMIRABLE,” THE doctor from the Winter palace declared. “There’s really no reason now why you shouldn’t get up and go down to dinner this evening.”

“The rewards of virtue,” Mrs. Redlake beamed. “What did I tell you?”

The doctor, his consultation finished, settled into a Dryad chair. He liked these visits to the western shore; they made a diversion from the monotony of cranky millionaire invalids and tourists and swells in *dahabiehs*. These excavators, as he sometimes told his friend the consul, were the only real people in Luxor. They didn’t talk Egyptology or vitamins or as eternal questions about *baksheesh*. Family life. He liked their porridge. Macadam was a Scotsman like himself and understood. All their food tasted different from the international cooking of the hotels; the only international thing, with the exception of the Sleeping-car Company (which was Belgian) in the world. He loved the Redlakes as everybody did. They and he, the chemist and his friend the consul composed the inviolable colony of oldest inhabitants. Also he didn’t mind Bredon, whom he suspected of

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genius, and he was attracted by Ruth. It pleased him to feel that the diminished resonance and breath-sounds in Bredon's left apex had disappeared.

"The rewards of virtue," Mrs. Redlake repeated, satisfied by her phrase.

"Why not call it the result of good nursing?" the doctor answered. "I attribute his whole recovery to Miss Morgan. Ever since she came here he's gone full speed ahead. An excellent augury for their married life. That happy—er—event at Luxor now becomes practical politics. Let's think about it. The manager tells me that a bishop is coming to Luxor at the end of the week after next. A bishop. Genuine, not colonial. Being married by a real bishop is as good as—no, what am I talking about?—better than being buried in Westminster Abbey." He laughed happily over his little gaffe; they all smiled at him. "Well," he went on, "shall I tell them on the other side, and fix it for Sunday fortnight? By then he should be as fit as ever he was. The air over here is wonderful. I wish I could stay here."

"Excellent," Mrs. Redlake agreed. "Then *that* will be over. Oh, what a pity! I'm afraid H. B. will have gone."

Hugh kept an ominous silence. Ruth was sorry for him; yet, surely, at a time like this he might forget.

Innocently the doctor relieved their tension.

"What? Is Bezuidenhout here?" he said. "I can't imagine how I haven't heard of his arrival. I should have thought he'd have called on me. Not that I insist on medical etiquette."

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"It's no good insisting on anything with H. B.," Mrs. Redlake answered good-humouredly before Hugh could express his disapproval of the lapse. "As a matter of fact he's up to his eyes in work. Quite a short visit this time. He's sailing for Boston on the *President Monroe*."

"Well, well, I suppose I shall be able to scold him at lunch," the doctor lazily agreed. "I think I'd better go and hunt up Redlake if he's anywhere about."

He rose; his leisurely eyes rested on Ruth. A new thought seemed to strike him. "This girl of ours doesn't look as fit as she might be," he said. "It's the usual story. The sick man gets better and the nurse crocks up. Let's have a look at you. Now tell me, Mrs. Redlake, how much fresh air and exercise has she been getting? I thought so. Practically none. Now that will never do." He turned to Hugh. "Now, Bredon, no more of this lover's selfishness. Remember you're going to have her for all the rest of your life. And now you're perfectly fit to look after yourself. What I prescribe is fresh air, all day long, from now until you're married. She ought to walk over into the Valley of the Kings. Cheerful distraction. Have a look at the work and scramble into some of these new tombs that Macadam's been excavating. That's my prescription. You agree with me, Bredon?"

Hugh agreed readily. "I'm far too busy to be lonely," he explained.

The doctor smiled at his way of putting it. "You blessed Egyptologists! Wait till you're married, my boy! Then, Mrs. Redlake, I leave her in your hands?"

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"Trust me," said Mrs. Redlake.

"He's perfectly right," Hugh told her in a mused voice, when the others had left them. "You have been sacrificing yourself for me, and I have been so damnably selfish that I haven't noticed it." His imagination began to swell on the quite negligible food that the doctor had given it. "Ruth, you're not feeling ill? You've never said a word to me?"

"My dear child, don't be foolish! Of course I'm not ill. I'm never ill."

"I believe you're putting me off. Now that he's mentioned it I can see that you're pale; you're thinner than you used to be. For me to feel ill means nothing. I'm always picking up infections and that sort of thing. Always have done. But they don't count with me. I'm 'salted,' so to speak. I'm one of those wiry invalids who live for ever. With you it's different. You're so magnificently healthy, in another way, that if you pick up anything . . ."

He was beginning to work himself into a fever of apprehension against which even her smiling protests seemed false and sinister. The more she protested, the more anxious he became. Then, suddenly, his anxieties culminated in a confession. "My sister—I never told you—she died of consumption. She was a strong, healthy girl like you. The memory's left its mark on me; that's why I'm so fiendishly frightened when this doctor fellow talks like that about you. Ruth, you're so infinitely precious to me, my darling."

It was sheer foolishness, she told him, to worry his head

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about her. Naturally the shock of his illness, the strain of his convalescence, had told on her. Did he realize, poor darling, that women could not be expected to be always at their best? No doubt the doctor was right. She'd been cooped up in the atmosphere of a sick-room too long. She would obey his orders, and take a cure of change and fresh air: "Though I shall hate to leave you," she said.

"I deserve it," he told her.

"You deserve much more than that for being so apprehensive. I shall tell you everything that happens while I'm away."

Already Mrs. Redlake had the matter in hand. At lunch she tackled the funereal Macadam and asked him what he would be doing that afternoon.

"Trying to catch up," he said, "for H. B.'s sake. His time is running short, and we want to get him on to all that Eleventh Dynasty stuff; the bomb that Bredon discovered behind the temple. During the last week while we've been busy they've done a good bit of spade work. The opening ought to be clear by now, so H. B. and I are going to have a look, and Southwold will come along with us, in case there's anything we need to record at once."

"That's splendid. Couldn't be better," Mrs. Redlake declared. "The doctor says that Miss Morgan's in need of a change. You can take her along with you. It may be exciting. Think of it, Ruth, you may see a new tomb opened!"

Macadam mumbled that he would be delighted. His eyes shot an inquisitive glance at Ruth. Bezuidenhout was

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silent. He might, she thought, have added his welcome to Macadam's. Immediately Mrs. Southwold became fussy with advice.

"Of course it's very interesting and all that," she whispered, "but really you've no idea of the dust. You can take my word for it that all your clothes will be ruined, so put on your very oldest. Of course, you're new and full of enthusiasm, but Connie and myself never go near the excavations now. You come out looking like a scarecrow. So I warn you."

"Half-past two, then?" said Mrs. Redlake, eagerly definite.

Macadam nodded. At half-past two Ruth joined them on the glaring plateau outside Astill House; the Scotsman solemn and lanky, needing nothing but black gloves to complete his funereal get-up; Bezuidenhout spare and powerful in bleached khaki; Southwold draped in his black focussing cloth and followed by the retinue that bore his camera. All of them seemed insensitive to the excitement with which this expedition filled Ruth's mind. Macadam, when he had satisfied himself that Ruth had joined them, went swinging off ahead with Southwold, leaving Bezuidenhout and her behind.

It was the first time that they had been alone together since they had left the train at Luxor. His intimate presence weighed on her, afflicting her with an awkwardness of which she was ashamed, for though the menace of Hugh's

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unreasonable grudging toward him lived with her, she would have been glad to recapture the mood of frank comradeship which she and Bezuidenhout had known for a few short hours in Cairo, and was ready to meet him half-way. Now that they were walking together through the brilliant open air the suppressed atmosphere which had developed between them in the hostel seemed childish and ridiculous. At least she could comfort herself that the fault was not hers.

For a long while as they passed together down the slope into the amphitheatre of Dêr-el-Bahari he did not speak. Then, suddenly, he gave her a mischievous smile.

"So here we are again," he said, "just as we were yesterday."

"Yesterday?" The words surprised her lips. It seemed a matter of years rather than days. He laughed:

"You're just as serious as ever. When one is working and interested the time passes quickly. It seems like yesterday. Now that I'm free for a moment it seems natural to pick up the thread."

"With me," she told him, "time hasn't passed so easily. Anxiety . . ."

"Of course. I know. But now you needn't be anxious any longer. Bredon is better, isn't he?"

"Yes, we are to be married on Sunday fortnight."

"And that's why you're so serious? Quite right. It's a serious matter."

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She did not answer him. His words, though soberly spoken, had a tinge of mockery in them. Above them, in airy derision; kites wheeled and screamed.

"But that is no reason," he went on, "why we should be exchanging these politenesses. Let's say what we think—not all of it, of course—and be as we were in Cairo. We're on a holiday. We're sightseers. Think of the hundreds of tourists in Luxor who'd envy our opportunities. We're going to open an Eleventh Dynasty tomb. The first Theban Dynasty. Nibhapetre Mentuhotep. Think of it!"

He went on to explain: "Thebes wasn't a cemetery in those days. The home of a vigorous race of Southern nobles determined to put some life into poor old Egypt; sick of the effeteness of the Kings of Memphis."

"Heracleopolis," she suggested.

"You're right. How did you know that? Ah, you've been here a fortnight, and already you've got the stuff on the tip of your tongue."

"No, it's not really as bad as that. Hugh and I have been reading together and that's our period. And anyway," she reminded him, "it was you who started history. Do, please, go on."

He laughed; he was laughing at himself, she thought.

"Intef, the first of them, was 'Keeper of the Gate of the South'; an imposing title, like the rest of them but no great responsibility when you remember how narrow the gate was. At any rate he had strength enough to separate Thebes from the North and Mentuhotep built the first funerary

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temple at Dêr-el-Bahari in the good old style of his ancestors. Choosing the Dêr-el-Bahari as a site was a happy notion. It set a fashion that lasted three thousand years or so, like all Egyptian fashions. An unimaginative people. . . . Then, five or six hundred years later, Queen Hatshepsut planted another temple on the top of his, the swell affair we see just in front of us, burying a lot of Mentuhotep's fancies under it. That's why our Egyptologists are getting so excited. The tomb they've discovered hasn't been opened, perhaps, for three thousand years, though probably Hatshepsut's temple-builders stripped it, in the dinner-hour, of anything that took their fancy. Reverence for the dead, as you've been told by all the nationalist newspapers, is a characteristic virtue of the Egyptians throughout all history. How would you like to have your ancestors dug up for bank holiday crowds to gape at in a museum? Of course, the modern Egyptians hate the idea. Look at this one!"

A scrofulous beggar, with one leg shorter than the other and a black Nubian skin, came running over to them; for both were strangers and he took them for tourists. He addressed them in English, and held out, imploring them to buy, a thin black stick, enveloped in torn linen, smeared with bitumen, from the end of which issued five shrunken claws. "Mummy's arm, Pasha," he whined, "from the tomb of Tut-ankh-amen." He hung to them, climbing downward through a long scale of piastres, until Bezuidenhout, in Arabic, sent him to hell. "Scarabs," he howled after them.

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"Pasha, I have ver' good scarab. No charge for looking. See!"

"There is your answer to the newspaper sentimentalists," Bezuidenhout told her as they left him limping behind. "And that's how the Pharaohs treated their divine predecessors. How many of the private tombs left unfinished at Thebes were completed by pious descendants after the owner's death? Precious few of them! And I agree. Better a living fellah with one leg and a half than a dead Pharaoh with two swathed in gold leaf. Don't you see?"

"It does seem sacrilegious, all the same. One can't help feeling guilty, and a little frightened."

"Frightened? You've been reading novels. Funerary warnings. Curst be he who moves my bones, and that sort of thing. The ancient Egyptian was too much of a realist not to know that his grandchildren would reverence him just as much as he revered his grandfathers. He didn't waste time on carving curses in his tomb. He carved requests for the things he wanted most in the next world; a staff of slaves, some women, a bit of duck shooting and three kinds of beer. The thing that troubles me when I see a thing like that miserable arm which the villain offered us, isn't the sacrilege to the dead, but the morbidness of the living. Tell me, what is it in human nature that wants to possess a relic like that? You can't; and yet fifty per cent. of civilized human beings would have a sneaking desire to drag it back to Europe. What can you make of it?"

They were passing a detached group of mud-brick dwell-

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ings, a hamlet that had established itself impudently on the very edge of the North Bromwich excavations. They heard the thudding of a drum. Two ragged figures with a laden donkey were singing at the top of their voices. The green flag fluttered from a stick above them. Women ran out of the houses with black cloths held to veil their faces. They clustered round the singers like a black swarm of flies. Ruth could not see what they were doing, but the song, which was wild as the scream of wheeling kites that its sound seemed to whip into a frenzy, and the monotonous rhythm of the beaten drum, so evocative, swept Bezuidenhout's question out of her mind.

"What is it?" she asked him. "What are they doing?"

"Those ruffians? I don't know what their proper name is. We call them the bread-men. They go from village to village along the escarpment collecting scraps of bread. That sack, on the donkey, is full of them. A kind of mixture of religion and scavenging."

"But surely there's not enough? Bread, I mean, or people to give it."

"That's the amazing thing. Would you believe it that this strip of mountain's the most thickly-populated patch in the whole province? Forty thousand of them at least. Mud huts plastered on the top of tombs. It's always been the same. In early Christian times the hermits lived here. They chose this damnable site for the contemplation of mortality. Thaïs—of course, you've read it? If not, remind me to lend it to you. These people, thank heaven, have found a

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better reason: cheap housing ready-made. There's nothing morbid about them. But wait a moment. Thaïs reminds me. Has Christianity anything to do with our—not yours or mine—the general morbidity? Think of a Latin funeral, the pomp of it! If that isn't a morbid, desperate adulation of death, what is?"

"But *is* that Christianity?" she answered.

"Who knows? . . . They're getting impatient. They're waving to us."

In the near distance, right under the frowning precipice of rock, Macadam and Southwold waited for them. As Ruth and Bezuidenhout approached she became aware of another sound which seemed to issue from a cloud of dust which was like that of a shell-burst: a shrill antiphonal chanting which answered one high, resonant voice; the work-song of the excavating gang. It was like nothing that she had ever heard before, unless it were the screaming of myriad sea-gulls dislodged as one by the sound of a gunshot on the cliffs of Gower. That was the antiphonal chorus, hurled back in magnificent echoes from those other cliffs of Dêr-el-Bahari, but the high solo voice to which the chorus responded seemed more powerful than the rest. The singer was a small boy. Perched on a conical peak of shale above a thunder of trollies running to the tip, above the dust-cloud in which a hundred half-naked men and children scrambled to and fro with their baskets of excavated debris, he waited, serenely, for his cue, put up a curved hand to form a megaphone, and threw out his high challenge, like a muezzin from his minaret

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or a cock upon a dunghill. His voice leapt out, ascended, and fell in clear quivering glissandos. It was not the voice of a child, but rather the exultant expression of all the life that throbbed, burned and grew weary in a hundred sweating bodies; their spirit, disembodied, soaring above the dust. He sang:

*Aus moya min Halimá,
Halimá, ana artshan khalis!*

At the end of each couplet the clear and ringing monotone of the multitude answered him:

Ha-li-má! . . . Ha-li-má!

Thrilled and intoxicated by the rhythm of that wild music Ruth turned to Bezuidenhout. Her mouth was dry with rising dust; she had to shout to make herself heard:

"What does it mean? Can you understand it?"

"Yes, I'll translate," he answered. "Literally, it's this; 'I want water from Halima. Halima, I am very thirsty!'"

"And no wonder! How can they breathe in dust like that?"

He laughed. "The words are symbolical. It's a love-song. Halimá is a lady's name. The water is . . . figurative."

Ha-li-má . . . Ha-li-má. . . .

Again the solo voice began its dizzy, agonized journey.

"I wish you'd go on translating."

"No, I'm afraid I can't. You're not married and I'm not

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your husband. The words have ceased to be figurative. By our standards they're indecent."

Ha-li-má . . . Ha-li-má. . . .

The hundred voices rang like one clear bell. Macadam and Southwold came stalking over to them. With them was a burly Arab with fierce blue eyes and henna-red moustaches; he carried a long thong of hippo-hide bound with silver wire. The workers scurried to left and right as he approached, fearing the lifted lash and the harsh voice in which he shouted: "*Imshi . . . imshi!*" He saluted Bezuidenhout gravely. They were old friends.

"This is Achmet, the *rais*," he told her. "The modern representative of Pharaoh's task-masters. Well, Achmet, how goes it?"

"*Queis, hakim. . . .* Very good." His English was guttural, distant. "I think we get a very good tomb. The wall is now quite clear."

"They're scratching away at the entrance now," Macadam explained. "Achmet has had his head in. In another ten minutes . . . I expect Miss Morgan's tired. You'd better take her out of the dust into the store, H. B. I'll send a message when we're ready."

The store was the ante-chamber of another tomb of later workmanship. The air within it was cool and dustless. Its dim and narrow length was lined by benches crowded with an accumulation of broken objects, the funerary junk of overlapping dynasties, unearthed, hand-sifted, and set aside

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for further examination and classification in the stores at Astill House: fragments of Canopic jars, with Horus heads; worm-eaten wooden figures of the jackal Anubis, with pointed snouts and ears; hundreds of baked-clay sugar-loaves, stamped on the butt with careless hieroglyphics; fragments of bas-relief in fractured lime-stone; little blue-glazed doll-like figures; the myriad evidences of a formal devotion that had not outlived their makers.

There seemed to Ruth something pathetic in these fruits of careful elaborate labor, broken, cast up like driftwood on the shores of a new world. At the sight of them, displayed and sorted, the old sense of negation, of futility, besieged her with admonitions that everything which she prized in life was subject, even as they were, to the scorn of time. The ringing antiphons that still reached them from the outer air seemed no longer a song of desire, but of savage and unavailing protest. The voice of Bezuidenhout, level and unimpassioned, snatched her out of the suffocation of this mood:

"You remember what I was saying," he told her. "If you look, you can see that this tomb has been occupied for centuries. You and I are only its latest tenants. The walls and the ceiling are black with smoke." He pointed. "Here's where one of Akhnaton's iconoclasts erased the name of Amon; which means that the tomb is early Eighteenth Dynasty. And here's a Coptic cross; an early Christian method of antisepsis. Probably some hermit, like Paphnuce in Thaïs. Certainly a hermit; now I can swear to it. You see? He's

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obliterated the figure of one of these mourning women, because, poor devil, it may have troubled his dreams. And here he's made six or seven shots at drawing a lion which looks like a poodle. Of course there were lions in the Gebel in those days. All of these occupied tombs are human documents for which your Egyptologist doesn't give a damn."

"Ready, H. B." The voice of Southwold called them from outside.

They passed out of the dim air of the store-house into a light that hurt the eyes, into the ringing antiphons of the untiring chorus, into the choking dust. The shambling figure of Southwold guided them down a precipitous path, where soft earth shelved in geological sections of loose shale, and peaty stable-rubbish, through layer on layer of palimpsest, down to the core of limestone. In the pit of the excavation the very atmosphere was solid with suspended dust. "Fresh air," Ruth thought, "and exercise. That's what you want!" The bank gave way beneath her feet. She would have fallen if in an instant Bezuidenhout's arm had not sustained her. Once before in Cairo he had taken her arm. It was reassuring to feel his strength; the hand of a man on whom one could depend. She smiled and thanked him; felt that she should not have smiled. Why?

Ha-li-má . . . Ha-li-má, the chorus rang behind.

Buried in dust, the bare legs of the *rais* Achmet and Macadam's black-trousered, decorous shanks, emerged fantastically through a low cranny three feet wide and one in depth. Another native handed to Bezuidenhout a spluttering

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acetylene lamp. The smell was familiar: wet lanes at night and a punctured bicycle tyre, thousands of miles away. Two pairs of legs went wriggling into the cranny like vanishing snakes.

"*On thy belly shalt thou go,*" Bezuidenhout quoted. "You're not afraid?"

Of course she was not afraid. Anything in the world to escape from the heat, the dust and Halima. She went down on her knees, then lay full length wondering what would happen to her skirts. The dust was warm and soft under her fingers. It had been scraped and shovelled out of the broken tomb. Macadam's dust of death. . . . Courageously, digging her fingers into it, she pulled herself forward and under the rocky arch, a mysterious hand grasped hers and pulled her inward. It was the hand of Achmet. He helped her to her feet. There was just room enough to stand. She saw a half-cleared chamber, hewn in the limestone with walls on which carved shapes declared themselves, defaced by the mud cells of vanished mason bees. An air of burning acetylene; a warm, dead, muffled air. And voices, muffled but curiously near. Macadam's voice:

"Magnificent! By Jove, we've done it this time, Southwold; where the devil's your hand? I must shake hands with some one. That figure's new. Oh, Glory Alleluia, what is it? These cursed bees build just where you don't want them. Southwold, for heaven's sake give me an inch of room; I want to read this *stele* if I can manage it. Ehe . . . h! Curse the thing! Miss Morgan, are you there?"

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Ruth laughed gently in answer. Macadam went on cursing with unusual fluency and humanity. He made a ponderous joke: "This is the language of practical Egyptology; the words are shorter than these you read in text-books." He went on mumbling to himself: "Ah, now, I'm getting it. Be quiet!"

Surely it was quiet enough, Ruth thought, as quiet as a tomb. Ridiculous *cliche*, pat off the tongue, yet meaning something for the first time in her life! She heard the wheeze of Southwold breathing through dust-clogged nostrils.

"Hen . . . Hen . . . Henhenet," Macadam muttered. "A woman's name, *Nephar*: that's beauty. . . . A servant in the temple. . . . Oh, damn the light!"

He swore at Achmet in Arabic. Achmet smiled with white teeth and turned a screw. The lamp spluttered again. All the time Achmet was smiling, making signs of excitement and delight, and mumbling, "*Queis, queis ketir*. Very good tomb, eh?" Suddenly he handed the lamp to Southwold and began to worm his way on his stomach down another opening, now defined out of the darkness from which a sound of grunts and digging could be heard.

"A priestess . . . priestess in the house of Amon," said Macadam. "Amon is undefaced. This *stele* escaped the servants of Akhanaton, thank God! I think I've got Mentu-hotep's cartouche. Southwold, d'you see?"

His voice, in spite of the Scotch inflection, was not the voice of Macadam; it was high and tremulous; the voice of a hound, Ruth thought, when it whimpers over a new

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scent. Doglike. . . . His ludicrous, jutting nose was that of the jackal Anubis, routing in broken tombs. . . .

Achmet returned and gurgled in voluble Arabic, his thick lips plastered with saliva and dust.

"What does he say?" asked Southwold.

"The passage to the second chamber and the drive to the mummy pit are pretty clear. I'd better leave the *stele* until they've reached floor-level and see what's doing. Miss Morgan, if you don't mind, you'd better wait for us. H. B. will look after you. He doesn't care for these things."

With hurried gestures of politeness Southwold and Macadam disappeared. Immediately she became aware that Bezuidenhout had been standing silently behind her. It was curious that, in the presence of the others he had not spoken a word. Curious that now, when they had gone and left him and her in the darkness he did not speak. There was no need for speech. Speech might have broken the feeling of confidence, of security, of which she was conscious in his presence. "If it weren't for him," she thought, "I should probably be frightened—not exactly frightened but uncomfortable. How natural this seems!"

After a little while Southwold came crawling back. Now even he was breathless and excited: "Bezuidenhout, give a shout for the cameras! Most remarkable! You can see right down into the pit. Robbed, of course; but, upon my soul a regular *grand-guignol*; a shilling shocker, if ever there was one. I'm going to try a flashlight photograph; catch 'em just as they are."

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The camera was pushed down through the aperture. "Wait here a moment," Southwold fussed. "I'll call you when we're ready. Not too much room," he explained. A moment later Macadam's thin voice summoned them hollowly. Bezuidenhout took her arm.

"You'd rather I went first?"

"No, no." It was a matter of pride with her to show her courage.

"Very well. Go on then."

The floor was heaped and uneven, but the roof did not compel her to crawl again, and for this she was thankful. In far less time than she had imagined from the thin hollowness of Macadam's voice, she reached the area lighted by their lamps. Beyond, descending blackness.

"Ah, there you are!" Macadam whispered eagerly. "We've a surprise in pickle for you. Southwold'll take a flashlight. Look over his shoulder. The camera's in the entrance to the mummy pit. Achmet's inside. Ready, Southwold?"

"Ready," Southwold grunted.

"Achmet!"

"*Aiwa?*"

"*Hadur!*"

And with the word Ruth heard the spit of flaring magnesium. Instead of the blackness descending beyond Southwold's shoulder a rockhewn chamber of dazzling brightness flamed on her retina like a countryside washed by lightning, and in it, sprawling, lying, sitting, propped upright, a company of dark and wizened human figures, carefully dis-

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posed to ape in death the postures of life, as by the malice of some macabre humorist. Out of their writhen heads death grinned at her. In spite of the courage into which she had steeled herself, her lips uttered a cry. Bezuidenhout clutched her arm. The grip of his brown hand restored her equilibrium.

"Steady! They're dead, and we're alive," he whispered close to her ear. The flash had faded. Over Southwold's shoulder nothing but darkness yawned before her. Macadam was chuckling like a delighted child: "A shocker of two thousand years B. C. That's very pretty. Try another, Southwold!"

One was enough, too much, her soul was protesting. Bezuidenhout's firm fingers still held her arm. Without them she felt that panic would have driven her blindly toward the open air, and shown the depth of her cowardice. She stiffened herself to conceal the shudders of fear—if that were fear—that still ran through her. Southwold was fiddling with his camera.

"What's that?" he said. "Another? No, it's not worth the plate. We're scientists, not showmen, and the chief's dead on economy. I hope it amused Miss Morgan."

"Then that's the end of the show," Macadam declared triumphantly, not waiting for her reply.

The end . . . thank Heaven! She whispered to Bezuidenhout: "Do you think we can go?"

"Of course, if you want to."

"I do want to, most awfully."

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"You're not ill?"

His voice was anxious.

"No . . . I don't know. I'm suffocating. I suppose it's the air. So dreadfully close."

"All right. Come along."

This time he preceded her. Reaching the aperture of the outer chamber he crawled through and gave her a hand; he pulled her out into the dazzling white air. Its sweetness . . . its relief! They stood and stared at each other. His eyes were lit with a serious, kindly smile. They seemed unusually bright within their rings of plaster dust. She was grateful for his kindness, his stability, his patience. Macadam's hectic, unnatural facetiousness had made her shiver.

"You're pale," he said. "I'm afraid we've overdone you. I'd better take your arm."

She consented. That, at least, was reassuring. This bright and living world seemed vaguely unreal and fantastic after the darkness beyond Styx. "My name," she thought, "should be Eurydice." This earthly air was so sweet, so cleanly that now she did not even notice the dust that still hung in clouds.

He pulled her up the shaly slope. They were like children escaping from the scene of some mischief. . . . On his conical mound the singing boy still bawled his lovesong as though his soul were in it. As they passed him he turned and grinned at them slyly, put up his hand, and carolled in their ears:

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*Aus moya min Halimá,
Halimá, ana artshan khalis!*

Ha-li-má . . . Ha-li-má! came the ringing antiphon.

"Well, he's alive at any rate," laughed Bezuidenhout.

His words came like the thrust of a surgeon's knife, relieving the pressure which had seemed to constrict her heart. She realized that they were nothing but a formula—ever since they had met he had been talking about life—yet their reiteration brought her comfort and release. Suddenly glancing at his lean, dust-smothered figure, she saw, as in a flash of divination, the infinite distance that separated their two selves from Macadam and Southwold, whom they had left behind, from the women at Astill House, from the kindly Redlakes; even—she hated to admit it—from Hugh. But it was true. She and Bezuidenhout were in one camp, and they in another. Against all that they stood for she was in active antagonism; for long enough she had known it, but only the presence of Bezuidenhout gave her courage to nail her colours to the mast. Alliance, defensive and offensive, Macadam had called it. An alliance that left her intolerably stranded between incompatible loyalties; and yet she could not refuse it.

"Now that we have made a beginning," he said. "I think we should see more of each other. Mrs. Redlake has told me that you need fresh air. Will you come with me to-morrow toward the Colossi?"

"I should love to come," she told him. "Only . . ."

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"Why do you hesitate?"

"I don't hesitate," she said. "I'll come."

"He is going away in a few weeks," she comforted herself.

PART FOUR



THE KEY

I

THEY FOUND Astill House subdued beneath the drowsiness of siesta; and Ruth was thankful; she was so tired, so shaken and perturbed that she could not face the task of producing the enthusiastic small-talk which would be expected of her. Under the shadow of its flat roof she bade Bezuidenhout good-bye. She had no words in which to express a hundredth part of the gratitude that she owed him. Only, impulsively, at parting, she gave him her hand, and by this unnecessary contact it seemed to her as if an alliance had been sealed, that the awkwardness which had separated them ever since their arrival was definitely at an end.

They parted; she went to her room with the burning cheeks and fluttered heart of a village girl returning from some secret and shameful assignation. As she passed the screened verandah behind which she knew that Hugh must surely be working, her conscience reproached her with stealth and disloyalty. She rejected the accusation passionately. There was more than one kind of loyalty in the world. For the first time since her arrival in Thebes she felt that she had been loyal to herself.

When, like a thief, she had reached her room, it amazed her to see her own dishevelled image. No wonder the

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women had advised her to put on her oldest clothes. There was not a fold in them unimpregnated by the dust through which she had crawled. Her hair was ashen; her shoes and stockings were full of it. She found a spiritual satisfaction in stripping herself to the skin, lavishly disregarding Mrs. Redlake's prayers for economy in the matter of water, until she was satisfied that no taint of the penetrating defilement remained on her. The act of lustration symbolized her abhorrence of that which Macadam had called the dust of death.

When she had cleansed herself, body and soul, she half dressed and lay upon her bed, with closed eyes, hoping that by the time the gong boomed for dinner her limbs would have lost their tiredness, her mind regained its equilibrium. She could not think; her head still throbbed and ached with the oppression of the stale air that she had breathed.

She must have fallen asleep; for when the sound of the dinner-gong penetrated her brain she was many thousands of miles away, pushing a punctured bicycle through wet lanes near Castel Ditches, with the smell of acetylene in her nostrils. She rose hurriedly and finished her toilet knowing that she would be late. By the time she reached the dining-room most of the company had assembled.

Hugh was there already, established in the seat which, during his illness, had been occupied by Bezuidenhout. As she entered he smiled at her, and her heart leapt to meet his smile, lifted on a wave of the physical attraction which

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had always drawn her to him. There was something friendly, familiar in the appearance of the dark clothes he was wearing, in the pallor and refinement of his face; something that snatched her back to an indefinite, compelling memory. At last she had it! It was in these same clothes, in that same posture, with features marked by the same clean asceticism of convalescence, that she had seen him sitting at the dining-room table of Castel Ditches on the day when first they had realized their love.

And now, as then, her spirit lightened with the joy of his recovery, and grew proud at the contrast between his refinement, his physical niceness and the diffuse, ungraceful people who moved about him. Here, too, there was a flattering difference; for while, at Castel Ditches, Diana and her father had treated him with grudging politeness, the company of Astill House were obviously pleased to see him back, welcoming him with kindness, even with respect. The friendly atmosphere of the whole room aroused in her a tenderness which freed her from the inhibition of modesty and impelled her, without thought, to go to his side and slip her arm about his neck in an unashamed, possessive caress.

"Now, Ruth, be careful!" Mrs. Redlake called. "If you behave like that you'll make us jealous. When you're as old as we are you'll realize that men should not be spoiled."

"So natural and nice," Mrs. Southwold generously declared, "I think it's splendid of her!"

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But Hugh, apparently, did not. The contact of Ruth's fingers which lightly stroked his hair produced a cat-like shiver, that moved his head away from her hand. It was an instinctive but unequivocal reaction; a repulse. It brought to her cheeks a blush, that swiftly spread into a flood of colour when she found the eyes of Bezuidenhout, who had entered quietly, fixed on her own. She felt that her humiliation had been sufficient without his seeing it; though why she should resent his seeing it rather than any other she could not say. Only she knew that his eyes were full of an unspoken question. "So this is he, the man you have chosen?"—and the question roused in her an immediate, defiant, protective antagonism that answered: "Yes, this is he; and what have you to do with it?"

Yet, while he advanced, as by habit, to his accustomed chair, she couldn't help being impressed by the obstinately recurrent contrast between Bezuidenhout and Hugh. He, like herself, had washed away all traces of the tomb's dusty pollution; dark clothes displayed his pliant strength as they had accentuated Hugh's fragility; there was a clean, robust vitality in his movement, an actuality that proclaimed him substance against Hugh's shadow. His presence aroused among the others not tenderness nor kindly concern, but an urgent, lively reaction. Ruth's instincts told her that the women were aware of him; the serious, sympathetic face of Mrs. Southwold suddenly brightened; the necklace on Mrs. Nash's bosom was agitated, she put up her hand to correct

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her masses of blonde hair; her coralline lips composed themselves into a girlish smile.

On Ruth the effect was wholly opposite. In an instant all those qualities in Bezuidenhout that had power to impress the others filled her with jealousy. She grudged them, she saw them, every one, as an offense to Hugh; so that Bezuidenhout's strength became coarseness, his vividness vulgarity, the admiration of the superficial people fallacious; an index of his own insincerity. Something in her glance must have betrayed her hostile feelings, for as he came forward his eyes were puzzled and he hesitated. As usual, in awkward situations, Mrs. Redlake intervened.

"Hurry up, H. B., we're dying of starvation, and you've kept us waiting. No, you can't have that chair. Invalids always take precedence. Of course . . . I'm sorry . . . you and Mr. Bredon haven't met." She blundered on: "But seeing what a good friend you've been to Ruth you oughtn't to need an introduction."

Hugh rose to meet him. The two men shook hands. How fragile, how thinly phantasmal Hugh looked beside him—and yet, Ruth told herself, how infinitely . . . finer! Hugh didn't say a word. Why didn't he speak? Ruth felt that she could have screamed at him to make him speak, poor darling! Why should Bezuidenhout's strength assert itself so confidently above him? It wasn't fair. She drew near to protect him.

But Mrs. Redlake's eyes had marked her movement:

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"Ruth, married people never sit together. You're very nearly married, and it isn't done. Come over here, my child."

She was torn away from him. On either side of Hugh Mrs. Southwold and Mrs. Nash established themselves. Sepulchrally the black Macadam intervened between herself and Mrs. Nash. Next came the ruddy, loose-limbed Southwold, his long, clean fingers stained with chemicals; then Mrs. Redlake; Bezuidenhout dead opposite, on Redlake's right. A quiet, sober company, their faces hidden from their opposites by long-necked bottles of Vittel which replaced the questionable Theban water.

That night they seemed more quietly subdued than usual; for Egyptologists, when they do not talk shop, are a silent race. The day had been hot, and Bezuidenhout, to whose combatant spirit they usually looked for enlivenment, showed no desire to entertain them. Only the two women occasionally emitted a bird-like chirrup across Bredon's plate. The rest ate slowly, stolidly.

"We're very talkative, I must say," Mrs. Redlake remarked all of a sudden. "H. B., whatever's the matter with you? Not that wretched malaria which you used to get?" He shook his head and smiled. "Really," she went on gallantly, "we ought to be celebrating Bredon's happy return. You'd better tell him, H. B., how Ruth behaved on the voyage out and set his mind at rest."

"That I can't tell him," Bezuidenhout answered slowly. "I scarcely saw her. She was otherwise engaged. Most unapproachably."

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"Of course, poor dear! How dreadful to be a bad sailor! But Cairo?"

"In Cairo she behaved . . . as you'd expect her to behave. Quite admirably."

Ruth was aware of Hugh's thin fingers fidgeting. He cleared his throat, and spoke the words which she knew were coming:

"I'm sorry you didn't show her the Boulak museum, Bezuidenhout."

"She didn't want to see it," was the good-humoured answer.

"If only," Ruth thought, "he would look this way I could catch his eye and warn him." She tried, by force of will, to make Bezuidenhout look at her. Mrs. Redlake, misunderstanding, beamed sympathetically on her agony.

"Nor even the Pyramids," Hugh persisted.

"Why should she have seen the Pyramids?" Bezuidenhout answered.

"Now, now, H. B.!" came Mrs. Redlake's warning whisper, quickly followed by the astonished voice of Hugh:

"Why? My dear sir . . .!"

"King Charles's head, my dear Bredon. Take no notice," said Redlake, with his crooked smile.

"Yes, why?" said Bezuidenhout, disregarding him.

There was a persuasive malice in his tone. It had begun! Ruth held her breath. Would he never, never meet her eye? Again she saw Hugh's fingers nervously entwined. His face

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was lit, as though a smoulder had flared up inside him; but before he spoke he weighed his words.

"Because"—he spoke deliberately—"you might just as well visit Agra without seeing the Taj Mahal, or go to Athens and miss the Parthenon. The Pyramids, when all's said and done, are the most impressive monument of all antiquity. Considering only their vastness . . ."

"I don't consider their vastness a matter of greater importance than their antiquity," Bezuidenhout replied. "An old hat's no better than a new one; a glacier's no more impressive than a snowflake. If you're defending the Pyramids as works of art it's another matter. In that case, equally, I'm prepared . . ."

He stopped. At last his eyes had met Ruth's, which dumbly implored him to spare her. But Hugh, who had seen the sudden sword-play of glances, was too proud and sensitive to accept the offered quarter.

"Naturally I defend them as works of art," he said. "What else are they? An art whose vastness evokes a sense of awe and grandeur, which, surely, is an artistic function."

Bezuidenhout smiled. "If it's vastness you're still after, give me the Woolworth building, which is beautiful and useful as well."

"H. B., you *are* incorrigible," Mrs. Redlake murmured. "I shall tell this against you at Rockefeller House."

"I'm speaking seriously," Bezuidenhout replied. "The Woolworth Building fulfils its purpose to the last cubic

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inch of capacity. The great Pyramid covers thirteen acres, all to enclose the corpse of the miserable Khufu."

"A half truth," Hugh maintained. "There is a spiritual element in architecture. It covers thirteen acres to impress the people with the Pharaoh's god-head."

"In which case it fails miserably. The god-head, or whatever you call it, of Mr. Woolworth is made impressive with a hundredth part of the Pyramid's material. Even if you regard the great Pyramid as architecture, can't you see that it defeats its own ends? It doesn't even show its size; its shape directs your eye to its ridiculous apex, its least significant point; it begins as a mountain, and ends as a . . . mouse."

He laughed at the inadequacy of his own simile. Everybody laughed but Hugh, who was in no mood for laughing. Now his long fingers were clasped tautly; the fire that had leapt into his face illumined all his spare body till it seemed that it must be consumed. In that moment of enthusiasm his face was peculiarly beautiful. Ruth saw it, and loved him for it. Such a transforming fervour mystically justified itself. She felt herself carried away into a passionate partisanship in which her reason had no part. Through all his body there glowed the light of faith. His very silence was armour against the blows that Bezuidenhout's shrewd tongue directed against him. Bezuidenhout was merely destructive; she had told him so in Cairo. His words came back to her: "My dear Miss Morgan, you can't destroy things that are already

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dead." But then, Hugh's faith was living. Without a tremor of voice to show the tumult within him, he began again:

"The great Pyramid is five thousand years old. Admitted that its form—'defeats its own end,' I think you said?—in its own time it was a considerable achievement?"

"Undoubtedly. But how does that help us now—except as an example of how not to do it? And why prostrate yourself before bad examples?"

"The workmanship alone. Think of it . . . Blocks of five tons with joins as fine as one ten-thousandth of an inch."

"I'll give you the workmanship. But now you're praising means to justify your end, which is as iniquitous as the converse. Good workmanship alone has never made a work of art."

"Leave it at that. I defy you to build another like it."

"I should consider it a crime against humanity. To waste the labours of a hundred thousand men for twenty years: two million years of human life. . . ."

"The war," said Redlake, quietly.

"Of course," Bezuidenhout rejoined. "I don't suggest that human beings are, or ever will be, immune from folly. I only say that the Pyramid is the greatest of all monuments to waste and folly in antiquity. A blasphemy against—not Bredon's Pharaonic god-head, but the divinity of man. Builders of pyramids . . . makers of wars! Was ever such stupidity set to attain such an ignoble end? The Pyramid's as stupid as the face of the Sphinx. Your ancient Egyptians were a stupid people. It grins at you from every temple wall

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and every tomb: an art still-born, that was contented with a handful of reach-me-down formulas to express all human life and its activities over a space of fifty centuries!"

"If you condemn Egyptian sculpture," said Hugh deliberately, "I have no more to say."

But Bezuidenhout had:

"I don't deny its technical refinements, its skill as handicraft. But art, for me, must be progressive, vital, vigorous; Egyptian sculpture is stereotyped, static, dead. An art of death-masks. Of course you can split hairs; in that way you can trace a sort of progress; but what, speaking broadly, is the difference between the sculpture of what you call the golden age and that of the Eleventh Dynasty tomb we saw to-day?"

"And what about coffee?" Mrs. Redlake whispered wistfully. With meaning glances her lips reshaped the word "coffee" at Mrs. Nash.

Hugh pricked up his ears; a new combatant light came into his eyes.

"Eleventh Dynasty?" he asked quickly. "What tomb is that?"

"Macadam's new affair, under Hatshepsut's temple."

"Macadam's? I'd have you know that tomb is mine!"

"No doubt, if you can square the Antiquities Department," Bezuidenhout laughed. "Macadam tells us it's the property of one of Mentuhotep's priestesses." He turned to Mrs. Redlake. His look said: "Yes, coffee, for heaven's sake!" But Hugh was white with anger.

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"Redlake, I call you to witness, that tomb is mine!"

"Of course, my dear fellow, I know it's yours," said Redlake soothingly. "There's nothing to be distressed about."

"Distressed? But it's been entered! Bezuidenhout's seen the sculptures."

Redlake came round and put his hand upon Hugh's shoulder. He was the only person in the room who showed no embarrassment.

"Naturally, my dear Bredon," he said, "we've gone on working at it. The digging season's too short to hold things up when one member of our expedition falls ill. Macadam, a person of experience has been superintending. I'm glad to think that now you'll be fit to continue."

Hugh rose to his feet. His face was drawn and haggard. He steadied his voice with difficulty: "Redlake . . . I'm sorry. I apologize . . . made a fool of myself. I think you'll realize the provocation. . . ."

The others were talking wildly as they filed into the domed ante-room to cover their discomfort.

"My dear boy, of course, of course," Redlake murmured.

"Unpardonable . . . I feel so strongly . . . Where's Ruth? Don't leave me!"

"I'm here," she answered. "Come along with me."

"Not that way," he said urgently, shying from the ante-room door.

"Go through my study, the corridor's unlocked," said Redlake.

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II

THEY PASSED through Redlake's study to Hugh's verandah and entered his room.

"Dearest, you'd better lie down; you've worn yourself out," she persuaded him.

But Hugh would not lie down. Tight-lipped and haggard as an avenging prophet, he stalked the room, spilling his indignation in jets of disjointed phrases. "To hear such words as those . . . and in this house above all others! The Pyramids a blasphemy! Who's he to talk of blasphemy? A scoffer . . . a Philistine . . . a Vandal! Blind to all beauty, incapable of reverence! A fellow without ideals or sensibilities. Ignorance. Stupidity. God, and he talked of stupidity, did you hear him? A gross, material, disintegrating bully . . . a cad, if you want the word! And all the others looking down their noses like a set of white-livered traitors and cowards. Even Redlake! I shouldn't have thought it of him. No, no, I won't lie down!

"Why don't you leave me alone?"

"You're fagged out already," she pleaded. "For Heaven's sake keep still. If you go on prowling about like that you'll drive me mad."

She caught at his arm; he pulled it roughly away from her. His eyes regarded her with the sullen cold resentment of a caged eagle's.

"If you can't leave me alone," he snarled, "you'd better go."

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"I shall do nothing of the sort," she said. "I'm going to stay here till you regain your senses."

He didn't even hear what she said; before she had finished speaking his indignation had whirled him away on another tangent:

"You heard me apologize to Redlake? Of course I had to. I'm sure he understood the provocation. Naturally he had to show himself wise and level-headed. It's expected of him, poor devil! For a second—only for a second—I lost my head. Who wouldn't have done? My tomb . . . To think that that scoffing, blasphemous fool had entered it before myself! I saw red. I could have killed him. Macadam. . . . When you come to think of it calmly, Macadam had a right to go on with the work; there's no jealousy between him and me, thank God! We're Egyptologists. But that other. . . . I shouldn't have felt it so much—I shouldn't have lost my temper if it hadn't been for the monstrous views he'd been propounding. The insults . . . ! It was as if he'd spat in our faces, damn him! I had to hold my own. Not one of them had the guts to speak a word. Not even Redlake. I should have thought that Redlake . . ."

So, once again, the weary circle began. . . .

"But, my dearest," Ruth protested, in an interval of exhaustion, "don't you—oh! can't you see that you brought it on yourself? It was you who challenged him. At one point he was ready to drop the subject."

A sudden memory made him pick up her words:

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"To drop the subject. Yes. Why? Because you gave him the hint!"

"Oh, Hugh, don't be so foolish!"

"I'm not a fool. Not that kind of fool at any rate. D'you think that I'm so dull that I didn't see you? Lord . . . d'you think you can trick me like that?"

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh . . ."

He turned on her with a sudden renewal of fury:

"D'you think I don't realize that you were in league with him. The others were merely cowards; but you were his ally. You tried to shut him up. I saw you. Why? Because you were anxious to protect him, to protect yourself, to protect your secret . . ."

"To protect you, my darling."

"Ah, then you admit it?" he cried excitedly. "You admit it. There *is* an understanding between you. Treachery! No other word will suit it. Ruth, you've betrayed me; gone over to the enemy." His voice rose and wavered with fear; his lips trembled and grew ugly; his eyes were aghast with agony. "What does it mean?" he cried. "What does it mean? Ruth, for the love of heaven, tell me . . . tell me everything . . . now!" He clutched her arm in a paroxysm of distress. She tried to answer him calmly, not to lie to him. Never had he seemed so pitifully dear to her as in that childish abandonment.

"My dearest, it means nothing," she said. "Nothing at all. I love you."

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"I don't believe it," he answered. "You're lying to me. I can see it in your eyes. The same look. Oh, Ruth, Ruth . . ."

For answer she folded him in her arms and pressed her cheek against his face. His skin was dank and chilly, his body rebellious in her arms like that of a cat which endures an embrace but thinks only of escape. He shuddered. "No, no," he muttered rapidly, "your kisses are as lying as your voice. You think you can fool me, betray me with a kiss. Ah, you're too clever for once!"

He thrust her away from him, and in a moment of silence, in which his thoughts were suspended in the air like a charged thundercloud, sat down on the bed with hands clasped and writhing and eyes staring wildly beyond her. When he spoke next the passion seemed to have gone out of him, his words were shaped as by an intense, unnatural calmness, as bald and considered as those of a lecturer expounding his thesis:

"I think we had better consider our position," he said. "To begin with, you admit that there is an understanding between you and this man. . . ."

"An understanding . . . My dear, the word is so misleading. I managed to make him understand that you were—how can I put it?—in too weak, too nervous a condition to argue with him."

"Because you knew he was stronger than I am?"

"Because I wanted to protect you."

"Thank God, I can protect myself! No, you're evading

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me. I can feel it. Ruth, why can't you tell the truth . . . the whole of it?"

"I've told you the truth already. I love you, Hugh. That's all the truth I know."

His eyes hardened; the words might just as well have remained unspoken.

"This understanding with . . . Bezuidenhout. It's not a thing of to-day. I know there's more behind it. You shan't dispute me. I know. You travelled on the ship, in the train together. You've admitted it . . ."

"A statement, not an admission," she pleaded.

"Don't interrupt me. You travelled together on the *Malua* to Port Said. About that journey you've been singularly silent, and Bezuidenhout was clever enough to be guarded when Mrs. Redlake questioned him to-night. D'you think I didn't notice his hesitation? By the time you two reached Cairo you were . . . friends. Tell me the truth—the whole truth, just for once. In Cairo something happened. You haven't accounted for your time there. Tell me what happened in Cairo. Tell me!"

"Hugh, I've been patient with you, God knows, but I'm not going to be bullied by you. Please understand . . ."

He laughed harshly. "What did I say? You're keeping something back. What is it? You needn't spare my feelings; you needn't trouble to protect me again."

She was silent. Beneath her silence her brain burned with indignation.

"Seven hours," he went on obstinately. "Seven hours. If

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you had gone like ordinary people to the museum . . .”

“Oh, damn you and your museum!” she cried.

Her unexpected violence flared like a lit fuse into his charged mind. He leapt to his feet, exploded into a blast of bitter words:

“Damn me and my museum! Exactly! Damn me and everything for which I stand! Damn all the beauty of the past! Disintegrate, destroy! You’ve said it. At last you’ve shown your colours. A traitress! What did I tell you? You’re his, his ally. Your mind’s poisoned, possessed. You daren’t deny it now. Oh, Ruth, Ruth . . .”

His voice broke wailfully on her name as though the sound of it on his own lips had power to dissolve the strength which had carried him through his last outburst. He threw up his arms, in the despairing gesture with which a drowning man goes under; like a shot man he crumpled up on the bed and lay there, dreadfully, hoarsely weeping.

With this all anger and scorn faded away from her. She hurried to the bed and fell to her knees beside him, holding him to her breast as if he were a weak, disconsolate child. Hugh went on sobbing brokenly. Her cheeks were wet with his harsh tears, her eyes blinded by her own. “Ruth . . . Ruth . . .” Her name was always on his lips, and now he no longer rebelled against her, but rather clung to her as the one stable thing in his world, so helplessly that her heart melted away with tenderness. They clung together, and wept, and spoke no word, in the tingling silence of Egyptian night, a silence terrible but strangely sweet.

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At last Hugh looked at her with hurt and shameful eyes.

"Ruth, you forgive me?"

"My darling."

"I love you, Ruth."

"And I love you. Now you'll believe it."

"God, yes! I never disbelieved it. I lost myself. I spoke like a madman. Something . . ." He struggled with words.

"We'll think no more of it," she said.

"If that were possible! You can't compel yourself to forget things."

"You should never have gone down to-night. If you had waited . . ."

At this he rallied. "No, no, that's rubbish. It was a momentary thing. I'm all right now. I *must* be all right. I shall have to begin serious work to-morrow."

"Work . . . always work! It's fighting against fate that's made you so ill. Oh, Hugh, you are so naughty; what shall I do with you?"

"Love me. That's quite enough."

"Foolish boy! Must I tell you again?"

He did not answer her. "How can you love me," he said at last, "when I have hurt you like this?"

"We've hurt each other. It's nothing. We shall get over it."

"Ruth, I couldn't help it. That man . . ."

"Hush, hush, my child! Don't think of him, don't speak of him."

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"I can't help thinking. And I want to explain. Ruth, will you hate me if I ask you something?"

"I shall love you, always."

"Bezuidenhout . . ." The old, mad urgency came again into his voice. "I can't bear the thought of his being near you. I'm jealous, frantically jealous—and unreasonable, I know. I don't want you to see him—no, that's impossible—to speak to him."

"He very rarely speaks to me, you know," she parried.

"But to-day . . . you went with him to-day—to my tomb?"

"For the first time."

"Ah, if you knew what mad, devilish things I've imagined! They leave their mark. Even when you don't believe them, spoken words have a life of their own; they hang about you . . . like smoke, like poison gas. Long afterwards. . . ."

"I know," she said. "But what you ask is rather difficult. It would need explanation, and make the others uncomfortable. I feel that we've no right . . ."

"You might explain to him," he pleaded. "Only to satisfy me."

"Then I should have to speak to him. It's illogical."

"Why not write?"

She smiled: "It seems so dramatic, so silly, so childish."

"I know it does. I suppose I'm all those things. And yet . . ."

He was so humble, so harassed, the trivial obstinacy

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meant so much to him that she felt forced to humour him.

"Very well," she said, "I'll write. Though heaven knows what I can say! If you like, you can dictate the letter."

"No, no, I don't even want to see it. Don't put me to shame any further," he entreated.

"I won't. But what I will do is to put you to bed. Come along, my child."

"I know I shan't sleep," he complained.

"You must."

"It seems so ludicrous that you should leave me."

"In less than three weeks I shan't have to," she reminded him.

"Three weeks? Three centuries! My love, my love . . ."

In a hallucinated calm, they kissed and she departed. Her little cloistral room seemed strangely unfamiliar to her.

On the table beside her bed lay a book with a salmon-coloured cover. It was the copy of *Thaïs* which Bezuidenhout had promised and left for her.

III

BUT AT dawn, when the first whimper of kites began, the writing of the letter to which she had committed herself seemed more preposterous than ever. Indeed, now that she was removed by the space of a night's sleep from the infectious agitation of Hugh's breakdown, she was able to consider the whole situation with a dispassionateness that surprised her. Viewed in that greyer light her indignation

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against Bezuidenhout as an aggressor, her loyalty to Hugh as his victim, seemed equally absurd; for Hugh had deliberately asked for, and insisted on having what he got, and Bezuidenhout had given him nothing but his own, uncompromising opinions.

It was Hugh who had turned their controversy into a personal matter; Hugh, or the lurking devil of disease that haunted him. She wondered what weakness in herself had allowed the weakness in him to dictate a new line of conduct that was unnatural to her, forcing her to reject a friendship that she had a right to enjoy. It seemed that he had taken an unfair advantage of her, claiming from her pity a concession that love might reasonably have refused, and tricking her soft-heartedness into an absurdity. She only regretted that in her anxiety to spare him she had not dared to tell him of her promise to walk with Bezuidenhout. That reticence had weakened her position; for to explain it now would mean re-opening the whole distasteful subject and arousing new suspicions. Rightly or wrongly—the question of right or wrong must not arise—she had taken Hugh's part. Of the two conflicting promises the one which she had given to Hugh must take precedence. Mechanically, without conviction, she set herself to fulfil her part of the pact.

Dear Mr. Bezuidenhout, she wrote:

First let me thank you ever so much for the copy of Thaïs which you left in my room. I know that I shall enjoy it.

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The ghastly, half-hearted hollowness of the written word! This would never do. She sat and stared helplessly at the white sheet in front of her. Other inspiration failing, she added address and date. Even if she failed in loyalty to Hugh she must be honest to herself. All of a sudden she began writing rapidly:

Forgive me if I seem incoherent. I am still rather bewildered by what happened last night. After the scene in the dining-room there was another in which poor Hugh broke down completely. I want you to make allowances, as I have done, for his state of health and for the strength of his enthusiasm which make him unduly sensitive. You see, through no fault of yours or his, you happen to represent everything that he hates. It looks ridiculous when I write it like this, but we can't expect everybody to feel the same as ourselves, can we? Apparently he feels so strongly . . .

She hesitated. She knew that she was temporizing, putting off the evil moment of true candour. Ashamed of herself, she continued firmly:

. . . that he cannot bear the idea of my being associated with you. Please be patient: I know we are very foolish. It seems that ever since that day in Cairo, which I shall always remember happily, there has been some odd sort of jealousy in the back of his mind. He wouldn't have spoken of it, I know, if he hadn't been so upset, but now that he's admitted

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it, I feel it's my duty to consider him. In fact, I've promised him to write you this letter and tell you that he doesn't want me to see you more often than is absolutely necessary. That shouldn't be any hardship to either of us, for you'll very soon be gone, and up to yesterday we haven't seen much of each other, have we? It means, of course, that the expedition we planned for to-morrow . . .

"For to-day," her mind corrected. "I seem to be losing all sense of time in this place. Well, let it stand!"

. . . is off. I'm sorry, because, quite truly, I'd looked forward to it. Thank you again for Thaïs. I'll return her to you as soon as I've finished, though I don't read French very quickly. I want to thank you for many things, but can't find words in which to express it.

Always yours sincerely,

Ruth Morgan.

Sincerely . . . Well, in a way the letter was as sincere as she could make it. She scanned it hurriedly and was disgusted with it. Now every word seemed false, cringing and apologetic. "Why should I try to soften it for him?" she thought. "As if he cared a *piastre* whether he sees me or not! Whatever I write he'll only laugh at it."

She sent her letter by the Berberine who brought her hot water. When she reached the breakfast-table Hugh was halfway through his meal and Bezuidenhout had already gone.

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The outburst of the night before seemed to have put new life into Hugh. Never since his arrival at Thebes, had he looked so well. There was something inhuman in his composure and his energy. Against all accepted traditions he was talking to Mrs. Nash, whose early morning frostiness dissolved like rime in her anxiety to make things smooth for him and convince him that the painful scene had left no trace on her memory. When Ruth came up and kissed him good morning he scarcely noticed her.

"I'm horribly late already," he said. "The gang begins work at seven and it's after eight. I've an enormous amount of leeway to make up."

"I think you'd better take a donkey," Mrs. Redlake suggested.

"A donkey? Why will all you people insist on treating me as an invalid? I never felt better in my life than I do this morning. The exercise will do me good."

"Have your own way," said Mrs. Redlake, "but don't blame *me*."

"Nobody ever blames you," he answered playfully, rising from the table. "We're far too fond of you."

"Ah, yes, that's all very well," sighed Mrs. Redlake, pleased by his flattery. "Ruth, dear, I think you'd better put your young man on his way."

Ruth followed him out on to the terrace. His brightness, his vivacity troubled her. They were too good to be true. Midway he turned and asked her sharply: "That letter . . . you've written it?"

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"And sent it."

"Good." He laughed, with an uneasy satisfaction. "I don't suppose," he said, "I shall see you much before this evening. I had a talk with Macadam early this morning, before you appeared. He's a queer, lonely bird, with a curious, half-mystical strain in him which makes him difficult to know. I like him, all the same. He's a first-rate Egyptologist and knows a lot more than you'd imagine. This morning we shall go through all the spade-work he's been doing in my absence. Then the fun will begin. It's full of promise, by his account: one of the best finds Astill House has had for a long time. It won't half touch up our American friends."

It seemed as if he were going to ignore completely all the incidents of the night before; to pretend, in his new access of energy, that nothing extraordinary had happened; to discount the part which her charity and devotion had played in winning him back to sanity. In his present attitude there was neither penitence nor gratitude, nor any shade of tenderness. He bade her good-bye perfunctorily, as though he wished it to be understood that he had serious work to do, in which neither her presence nor her sympathy would be of the slightest value. Implicitly he put her in her place, like a tiresome child, and hoped to goodness she would have sense enough to leave him alone and not to be a nuisance.

She wasn't used to such cavalier treatment. It bewildered her. After the moments of passionate reconciliation in which she had glowed to feel herself a refuge and a protection for

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him, she had expected to receive—if not his gratitude—at least some signs of love. She felt a gust of resentment at the business-like satisfaction with which he had dismissed the letter to Bezuidenhout that had cost her so much pains in writing. He seemed to regard it as an ordinary duty performed under his direction rather than as a difficult and humiliating experience.

Uneasy, bemused, disorientated, she spent the morning in the women's tent, sewing and talking lazily with Mrs. Nash and Mrs. Southwold. All three pretended that the ungainly scene had never occurred; all three were conscious of it continually, carefully avoiding any line of conversation that might lead them toward the forbidden subject; all three were exaggeratedly kind, charitable and unnatural.

Mrs. Redlake, who led her aside after luncheon, was more candid.

"My dear, I'm glad it's over," she said. "Of course, knowing the two men as well as we do, we all realized that a clash of some kind was inevitable as soon as they met. That thunderstorm will have cleared the air, and now we'll all be happy together, won't we?"

And Ruth assented; but she was far from happy. Unable to face a repetition of the morning's forced geniality, she set off, as soon as the sky cooled, upon a lonely walk. She went without enthusiasm. From the moment in which she emerged from Astill House, the weary negativeness of Thebes began to weigh upon her. Whichever way she wandered from that oasis she would be forced to encounter a barrage of sterility

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and death. On one side the cliffs of Dêr-el-Bahari, on another the barking dogs of the native villages hemmed her in. She set out walking due North, across the barren spur of *gebel* that separated Astill House from the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings.

An approachable horizon promised, at least, variety; but when she had scaled the tomb-riddled terraces and reached the ridge, her eyes were met by a desolation even more death-like than that of the landscape which she had left. Alone upon the summit, poised between sun-bleached rock and the brass salamander of sky, her courage suddenly failed her. The ringing echoes of a work-song floating upward from the excavations in which Hugh and Macadam were toiling brought her no sense of companionship or relief. She knew that they could not help her. Even if she turned tail and struggled to reach them her panic would pursue her and keep pace with her, for they were allies of the thing she dreaded. In all those valleys, in all the wilderness of Thebes, there was no living soul who could give her confidence except Bezuidenhout, whose friendship Hugh had compelled her to reject. She tried to concentrate her mind on memories of his company, recalling words that he had spoken, repeating them to herself, like a Thebaid hermit muttering prayers against the devil of noonday. Fortified by this vicarious strength she returned, half-blinded by light and limp with heat, to her own room at Astill House.

That evening Hugh appeared again at dinner. Her eyes awaited his enemy, but Bezuidenhout's place was empty.

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"H. B. is buried in his notebooks," Mrs. Redlake explained, "so I've sent his dinner to his room."

His absence sent Hugh's spirits soaring. Work had gone swimmingly; he wasn't in the least bit tired. When dinner was over he sat on talking with Redlake and Macadam at the table.

"Obviously we're not wanted," said Mrs. Redlake, shepherding Ruth into the ante-room with a smile. And even when Hugh joined her, a little later, Ruth knew that he did not want her. His eyes were distant, abstracted; the fever of the day's work still burned in his blood. If he spoke of anything else his thought was not in his words, and so she let him have his way and talk of it.

"The tomb itself isn't so remarkable," he said. "There's nothing definitely new. Apparently, at some time, it's been used as a sort of dump for robbers. It's full of later mummies that Macadam tells me he showed you. A sort of *danse macabre*. The inscriptions are a bit puzzling—I shall have to work at them—but I think, beyond doubt, we've got three temple-ladies of the Eleventh Dynasty, a darkish period on which these three may throw some light when we've lugged them up to the work-shed and can have a look at them. Good Lord, how sleepy I am!" he yawned.

"Poor darling! How can I make you be more careful?"

"You can't. It's no use trying. Better give it up. How could I have done a day's work like this if I wasn't fit? And to-morrow . . ."

He kissed her good night in the verandah outside his

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room. On her side the embrace was passionate; but Hugh was thinking of his to-morrow; even when his lips were on hers his mind was not with her and though he feigned to prolong their parting she felt that he was relieved when she left him.

"He thinks he's been clever," she told herself; "he imagines I don't know that he was glad to be rid of me"; and with this she began to regret the kisses she had given him, the inequality of the exchange. Was the exchange unequal? If she were guiltless of deceiving him, hadn't she been guilty, perhaps, of deceiving herself, trying to consume in a spurious flame of physical sensation the doubts, the loneliness, the humiliations that she refused to admit?

As she made her way to her bedroom, thoughts of Bezuidenhout obstinately returned. Outside her door she could smell the reek of his Boer tobacco. While she undressed she could hear his movements in the adjoining room. He was working late, as Mrs. Redlake had told them. Was that the real reason why he had absented himself from dinner, or had her miserable letter anything to do with it? She tried to recall the terms in which she had written. She could not remember them exactly. She only knew that they were false, as false as the kisses she had given to Hugh and those which he had given her in return.

"I am disloyal to everyone, myself included," she thought.

Even though she could not sleep she determined to put Bezuidenhout out of her mind. She took up the copy of *Thais*, and began to read, and, as she read far on into the

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night a new vision of the Thebaid shaped itself out of that crystalline prose. She saw the dead city bleaching in the same cruel sun, two thousand years ago, troubled at night by the same wailing jackals, haunted, as now, by visions of discarnate evil. If she had read it before, at Castel Ditches, she might have dismissed it as an ironical *tour de force*. That night, at Astill House, it became a document of authentic truth. Two thousand years ago, in this same place, the hermit, Paphnuce, had lain as she lay, wrestling in prayer against the spectral temptations that the devils of the waste deployed against him, waking to find the little jackals sniffing at his bed. Like her, that afternoon, he had been haunted by panic fear in the full sunlight; like her he had fought against it; like her he had lain down lonely, his mind obsessed by memories of the courtesan Thaïs, even as hers was obsessed, this night, by thoughts of Bezuidenhout.

In that, at least, the most fantastic mind could find no parallel; for Thaïs was nothing but a devilish phantom forged for the destruction of the hermit's soul, while Bezuidenhout was anything but phantasmal, a champion of life, the declared enemy of all that the Thebaid stood for, an actual man among this drift of ghosts, offering her stability and salvation. That was exactly what the hermit had thought of Thaïs. Paphnuce had been convinced, as she was being convinced, of his own rightness; even in his prayers the devils of the waste had smiled at his hallucinated self-justification, as now they smiled at hers.

The book was accursed; she threw it away from her and

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put out the light. Under that haunted night she could be sure of nothing; its influence so disorganized her mind that she could no longer distinguish angel from devil, good from evil. Out of the darkness the face of Bezuidenhout smiled at her with clear and confident eyes. And still she tried to put it away from her; she distrusted it; she distrusted everything on earth. She was lost. There was no faith in her.

IV

THE MORNING found her still nervous and shaken, but puzzled, all the same, by her imaginations of the night before. In daylight they seemed so unsubstantial that she ended by accepting them as an unpleasant dream. It was true that the salmon-coloured copy of *Thäis* lay open on her bedroom floor. She might easily have thrown it there, as she remembered; with equal probability it might have fallen from her sleepy hands. In any case the book was innocuous. She picked it up, determined to finish reading it, and took it down to breakfast with her. On her way there she ran into Bezuidenhout. He was by no means the Bezuidenhout of her dream. He smiled and wished her good morning as gaily as if the wretched letter had never been written. "Thank heaven," she thought, "he isn't offended."

The morning bustle of Astill House was reassuring in itself, and Hugh, who declared that he had never slept better in his life, had actually energy enough to take notice of her. He even proposed that she should walk a little way

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with him toward his work. In that bright morning air he was gay, affectionate, buoyant, as though he had not a care in the world.

"Tuesday's an off day," he told her, "but to-day we're too rushed to think of holidays. Redlake has given us a gang, and we expect to get our three ladies out and bring them home with us. Then I shall be able to get down to the job. You've no idea how much laboratory work it means. The stuff's so brittle that you hardly dare touch it. Only think! Before you came I was the best part of a month working on a painted coffin, filling in the cracks with wax, bracing the splits together, trying to reconstruct the decoration. Some day I'll show it you: I'm rather proud of it. The deuce of it is that this time we shall have to hurry. The Chief wants us to get the three royal ladies opened and unwound, so that the anatomist"—he shied at Bezuidenhout's name—"can make his examination before he goes. Personally I hate this speeding-up; but Redlake has some theory about Eleventh Dynasty embalmment that he wants to establish, so we shall have to go ahead. I shall get Southwold to lend me a hand. Macadam will go on with the clearing of the tomb. He is first-rate at that kind of job. He understands the workmen, and his Arabic's much better than mine. I'm thankful, for lots of reasons, that I shall be working at the house. The sun's a bit trying, for one thing; and then I shall be able to see much more of you. I'm afraid, my sweet, I've been rather forced to neglect you; last night I was fagged to death. Now we'll begin a new life." He laughed. "That's what I

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feel like this morning." As they walked he caught her in his arms and kissed her. "What are you doing with yourself to-day?" he asked.

"I have a book to finish," she told him. She could not help suppressing the name of the book and that of its lender. She hated herself for this reservation. She was on the point of confessing when he went on:

"It's Tuesday. Mrs. Redlake will be going over to Luxor. Why don't you hitch yourself on to her? Lunch at the Luxor Hotel and have a chat with the doctor at the Winter Palace. You'll be getting stale if you keep on sticking to this side. It's different with us men; we've our work to think of; but I'm sure it's bad for you. Now I must run like the devil."

It was sweet and generous of him, she thought, to consider her like this, for in these distressful days she was thankful for the smallest mercies and so unsure of herself that she was delighted to find any justification for him. His kiss sent her back to the hostel in a state of indefinite happiness.

That morning, with characteristic uncertainty, Mustapha, the donkey-boy, had brought in the letters from Luxor an hour earlier than usual. In the vaulted ante-room Mrs. Southwold was eagerly running through them before the eyes of strangers should fall upon her own.

"Here you are, Ruth," she cried, "two for you. One from England and one from France."

The first was in Diana's backward-sloping hand, it carried in its pages the dank, mellow, ripe-apple smell of Castel Ditches. Ruth couldn't imagine why Diana had gone to the

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trouble to write it, for it contained no news; nothing but a bald chronicle of weeks in which life rolled slowly, like waggon-wheels creaking through the mired lanes. Only in the postscript did the letter's real purpose appear. *"I've addressed you as 'Miss,'"* Diana maliciously added, *"because up till now we've heard nothing about your marriage. I suppose it's all right?"*

All right! How like Diana! Ruth tore the letter into fragments, determined not to answer it, and opened the second with the Paris postmark, which came from Mildred and swarmed over seven boldly-written pages.

"I'm still anxiously waiting to hear from you, dearest," Mildred wrote. *"That night when I saw you being dragged away so helplessly out of the Gare de Lyon I was so anxious and unsettled that I couldn't sleep a wink. You know me and my silly premonitions; but you know, also, that I can't help them any more than I can fly. (I'm going to fly, by the way, when next I cross to London!) I wish to goodness you'd write a real long, gossipy letter and tell me that everything's all right . . ."*

First Diana, then Mildred! Why were they all so stupidly concerned about her in that old, distant world of theirs? Ruth had no patience with them; she skipped three pages.

"I'm afraid I shocked you . . . Hope you weren't offended . . ."

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So stale, so meaningless! As if it mattered!

"I couldn't help thinking, by the way, about your traveling companion—not the dear sister, of course, but the man we decided was Belgian. After you'd gone he struck me as an extraordinarily interesting figure. I wondered if he was Belgian after all? I suppose you weren't either of you so immodest as to speak to each other? Do tell me, just to satisfy my curiosity, and do write soon. I've been thinking an awful lot about you, Ruth dear, these last three days; and I should hate to lose touch again as we did before . . ."

"Young woman, young woman," said the voice of Mrs. Redlake, "what do you mean by day-dreaming at this time of the morning? Anyone would think you were in love. I shall tell Bredon about you. Do you know I've been standing here for the last three minutes asking you if you'd like to come with me to Luxor? I shall be busy myself, but you can go and come back with me, and I think it would do you good. What do you say about it?"

"I'd love to go," Ruth told her.

"Then hurry up and make yourself pretty."

All the way down to the river Mrs. Redlake kept her busy with lively chatter. On the other side she abandoned Ruth abruptly, waving good-bye with her fly-switch as she hurried to a luncheon appointment at the Winter Palace. To Ruth the movement and life of Luxor were a relief after the silences of Thebes. When she had lunched alone in the cool,

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quiet, pleasantly shabby dining-room of the Luxor Hotel, she walked under a long, sun-dappled avenue to the Nile embankment.

Three of Cook's broad-beamed steamers lay like fat ducks against the bank. The front of shops was busy with tourists, eager to stretch their legs, haggling with hawkers for imitation scarabs and Soudanese fly-whisks, pestered by donkey-boys, conjurors, paper-sellers and flies. Their faces were all happy, bronzed with river-air. They smiled and joked and lounged, bought face-creams, fruit-salts, picture-postcards, and the works of Robert Hichens, and were content that Thomas Cook had given them their money's worth in Nile fish and the glamour of the East. Some of them, who had visited Luxor on the voyage upstream, clung to the parapet, gazing wistfully over the opaline Nile water toward the tawny cliffs of Dêr-el-Bahari, which, probably, they would never see again. A well-fed contentment filled them with romantic speculations.

"Gee, Isabel," Ruth heard one perspiring gentleman murmur, "I certainly don't like leaving it. It'd tickle me to death to spend a year among all those quaint old tombs."

"Yep . . . sure, you bet," said Isabel, without enthusiasm.

When Ruth returned to the embankment from the garden of the Winter palace, where, among blue-green lawns on which pied hoopoes pecked and set their crests coquetishly, and under feathery, kite-haunted date-palms, she had sat trying not to think, one of the tourist steamers, the

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black-funnelled *Soudan*, was swinging out into mid-stream, with her stern-paddles splashing, setting her course for northward. As Ruth watched her clumsy evolutions the wistfulness of all departures crept into her mind. Unquestioning, her heart had flown aboard the steamer with the waving tourists; her imagination drifted with them downstream to Cairo, from Cairo to Port Said. And then . . . Her reason suddenly checked the fantastic adventure. Beyond Port Said she could see nothing but the grim streets of Cheltenham and Castel Ditches, grey beneath driving rain. Theirs was a life that she could never recover. Between her and them lay more than seas and continents. Her fate, whatever it might be, awaited her unalterably on the western bank of the Nile. She knew that she must return to face it, and told herself, obstinately, that she was not afraid.

Mrs. Redlake, hot and breathless, touched her shoulder and hurried her down the gangway to the Expedition's *felucca*.

"I thought I'd lost you," she said, as the sail filled and the drowsy current wafted them ghostlily toward the other side. "Oh, Ruth, these millionaires! My dear, you're lucky that Bredon isn't Director. They seem to think, because I'm Stephen's wife, that I'm a sort of lady-in-waiting at the court of Thebes, ready to present them, at a moment's notice, to Nephertiti and Hatshepsut and Tutankhamen and Rameses the Great and all the other majesties. Wait till I get back to Worcestershire with my delphiniums and my

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roses! It's always the same. By the middle of February I've had enough Egyptology to keep me going for a lifetime. I hope you enjoyed yourself better than I did. I'd have been far happier having tea with you quietly at the Luxor. Do look at Dêr-el-Bahari! It's lovely this evening."

Above the quicksand foreshore Mustapha, the donkey-boy, awaited them. "What's the meaning of this?" Mrs. Redlake cried. "Only one donkey? Where's Barley-Sugar?" Mustapha leered ingratiatingly and became guttural. "But you knew that the Sitt had come over with me, you little fool!"

Mrs. Redlake slipped into kitchen-Arabic of a precipitous fluency. Mustapha joined in the race.

"Ruth, this is too unfortunate!" she said. "These creatures have no initiative. It seems that Steven went with Southwold and Achmet to some new site beyond Medinet-Habu that they wanted to prospect. Steven didn't realize that you'd gone with me, and this idiot hadn't the nous to tell him. Now he smiles and says that he only obeyed orders. Grrr! You little, cross-eyed donkey!"

"It doesn't matter," Ruth told her. "I'll walk. It'll do me good. Doctor's prescription."

"I'll walk with you. We'll take turns, if you like."

"No, no. I shall enjoy it. When you get home you can send the donkey back to meet me. I'll come along the straight road. I can't lose my way. I shall see the colossi."

"Very well. . . . But I hate leaving you."

She trotted off with a vicious whack at the donkey's thin

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quarters. The evening was very sweet. When once she had left behind the trampled dust of the landing-stage and the tent of the Camel Corps police, where one unruly male, knee-haltered, slobbered and gargled its swollen jelly-like tongue, the countryside seemed sinking to rest in a mellow, Biblical peace. Here the green levels of cultivation and grey of weeping tamarisk hid from her eyes all knowledge of the barrenness beyond. Along the banks of irrigation channels, returning tired to their villages, the frieze of flocks and camels and fellaheen moved, yet seemed fixed against the quiet skylines in endless repetition, like figures in bands of bas-relief on the temple walls. So moulded in monotony were they, so slowly they moved, that they seemed lifeless, nearer to wood or stone than to flesh and blood. But the air was alive, sparkling, in windless suspension before sunset, into myriads of minute points of light: wings and bodies of transfigured ephemerids, to which, as to all other live things visible, Nile water had given life. Among these shining specks the birds made havoc, in swift, glancing flights. Swallows! Ruth could hardly believe it. Swallows in February, vanguard of the Spring migration, swept northward, none knew how or why, out of the middle of Africa! Those curved wings, that cut the air like black scimitars as they wheeled and darted, might some day flash about the eaves of Castel Ditches, or flicker, like bats, into the barns where buff-breasted fledglings sat solemnly a-row. She thought: "If I could turn myself into a swallow . . ." No, no . . . That desire had died when the black funnel of the *Soudan* smoked

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out of sight. Sufficient for the moment was the beauty thereof.

The field of opium-poppies still flowered; they were like a river-mist of opal. Down by the water-channel the delicate sand-pipers still lifted dainty feet, and malachite bee-eaters threaded the moist air and swayed the tamarisk feathers with their weight.

Not a sound; not a sigh of wind in the sugar-cane. . . .

But here, since she saw them last, the fields had been cleared and broken by the plow; here, as on Shropshire arable, the landing plovers planed down and ran along the ground before they folded wings. Lost in the upper gold, larks were singing.

The road ran like an arrow between acres of black tilth. Its straightness might have been wearisome if she had not now seen at its end the two colossi of Memnon, gazing eastward over her to the molten summits that guarded the Red Sea. At the distance from which she viewed them, these gigantic figures, bloomed with evening air, seemed almost friendly, sharing with her, in their immobility, the solemnness of sunset. Their vast hulk claimed her eyes and her thoughts so completely that it was not until they overshadowed her that she became aware of a dwarfed human figure, sitting, in contemplation, upon one of the blocks of stone that lay fallen at the southernward monster's feet. A European, perhaps some romantic and belated tourist, with a brown felt hat pulled down over his eyes. But before her eyes could recognize him her heart leapt and told her that it was Bezuidenhout.

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"I must go back," she thought rapidly. "He's seen me: I can't go back. And why *should* I go back?"

She approached. He rose, and took off his hat to salute her:

"So we have come to the colossi after all?"

"You knew that I was coming this way? You've seen Mrs. Redlake?"

"I'd no idea. After your letter you might give me credit for so much politeness. I always come here when I'm free. I'm like a cat. I have my favourite places. Sit down for a moment."

He was very quiet, contained, sombre. His eyes were tired, as if the late work had told on him. She was sorry for him, but felt that she must defend herself. She remained standing.

"You read my letter, Mr. Bezuidenhout?" was all that she could say.

"Yes, yes. You let me down most gently, tactfully. It was kind of you."

"I'm afraid I must have hurt you."

"No, not a bit." He hesitated. "Because you didn't mean it . . . and didn't want to write it. Let's talk no more about the damned thing. Come and sit down."

"Mrs. Redlake is sending a donkey back for me," she explained, unreasonably.

"All the more reason why you shouldn't tire yourself by walking. Let us be sensible and natural for once, just as we were in Cairo. We shall do no harm to anyone, shall we?"

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The valley's very lovely this evening. It's a pity to miss it."

"I can't," she said. "I think I'd better go on."

"Very well, then," he answered, "you shall go. We'd better take the opportunity of saying good-bye. In a fortnight I shall be gone, and you'll be married."

But when he held out his hand to say good-bye to her, she decided, irrationally, to stay with him. They sat down together on the debris at the placid monster's feet without a word. The Eastern hills, beyond the river, became rose-tinged alabaster, flawed with azurine shadows that seemed to belong to dawn rather than sunset. Out of blind distance they heard the music of innumerable creaking water-wheels and long-poled *sheydufs* that tumbled Nile water, the life of Egypt, into irrigation channels. Each pivot or axle of warped wood had its own work-song. "I can distinguish them all," Ruth said.

He smiled, and told her a story against himself: how he had begged a friend on a farm near Assiut to replace the clumsy mechanism with one power-driven pump, and how his friend had laughed at him and told him that this would never do. "Because, when he was sitting in his garden," Bezuidenhout explained, "he could know by the songs of his different water-wheels exactly who was working and who was not, and keep a check on his workmen."

Ruth smiled at the story. By this time all memory of Hugh's letter had vanished. Without knowing it, this leisurely companionship had brought her back to herself.

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"So even a logical futurist like you must sometimes find himself in the wrong," she said. "Doesn't it strike you as inappropriate that we should choose the stones of Amen-hotep's colossi to sit on?"

He laughed. "The colossi of Memnon are my principal weakness. I like the brutes; or, at any rate, I hate them less than all the rest. I like the resolute, contemptuous way in which they turn their backs on Thebes. And I like to think—although this is a dead secret—of old Herodotus coming up to them at dawn with his notebooks like any Baedeker, and solemnly waiting for them to sing. Of course they didn't sing for him or anyone else."

"Oh, but you're wrong. Listen, they're singing now!" Ruth cried.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen!"

It was true. Thirty feet above them, in the bend of the seated giant's left knee, wild bees had found a crevice for their nest. Around its mouth they hovered in a singing, sun-lit nebula; dark honey dripped and congealed on the red sandstone below them.

"By Jove, you're right," Bezuidenhout cried. He took her fingers in his hand. They stood like ecstatic children gazing at the miraculous swarm. "Ruth, let's be superstitious," he said. "This is our secret. Let's keep it as an omen for the future; the day when the colossi of Memnon came to life!"

She blushed and trembled. She had never heard her name

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on his lips before; but she could not resent it, nor did she move her hand from his. Her silence made him conscious of his own daring.

"I must apologize," he said. "I'm afraid I called you Ruth."

"It doesn't matter," she answered softly, "we're only saying good-bye."

His face hardened with a shadow of pain.

"Yes, we are saying good-bye," he said. "It's good of you not to mind. Why did they give you that name, Ruth?" His voice grew soft upon the word.

She shook her head. "My godfather and my godmother . . ."

"Because," he went on eagerly, "it's the only name for you. Chaucerian English. Troilus and Cressida. I wonder if you remember?"

With another man she would have escaped his question or veiled her ignorance in silence. With him she had no desire for evasion.

"No, I don't know," she said. "Chaucer is nothing but a name to me."

"But you know the story of Troilus and Cressida . . . Criseyde, he calls her?"

She shook her head.

"I'll tell it to you. A Trojan love-tale. Like all good love-stories it begins in Spring. Not a real Trojan Spring, by the way . . . I had that in Gallipoli. Chaucer knew better: he sets his tale in England:

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*"when comen was the tyme
Of Aperil, when clothed is the mede
With newë greene, of lusty Ver the prime." . . .*

Troilus saw Criseyde in the temple and fell in love with her. Her uncle, Pandarus, tells Criseyde of Troilus's love. She thinks of him and sees him coming home from battle with his helm hewed in twenty places, his horse bleeding and all the crowd acclaiming him:

"So fresh, so yong, so wieldy seemëd he!"

"And naturally, poor child, she falls in love with him. But they are forced to part. Criseyde is sent as a hostage to her father's tent in the Greek camp, and there she encounters another hero, the 'sudden Diomede.' *Sudden* . . . think what a splendid adjective! The sudden Diomede has been wounded in battle by Troilus. Criseyde nurses him. Diomede makes heroic love to her, and, out of pity for him, she falls. Later, Troilus hears of her infidelity and dies, fighting desperately. That is the end of the story, and Chaucer, the wise old poet, has pity for them all. Listen:

*"For she so sory was for her untrouthe,
Ywis I wolde excuse her yet for Routhe."*

"Routhe is the English word for Pity. You know? That's why it suits you. Because you're pitiful . . . full of pity, I mean. You've taken pity on me this evening. God knows I'm

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thankful for it. If we hadn't met once more like this I should have left Thebes very sadly. Pity's your name, Ruth. You're ready to pity all of us. And pity, at present, is enough for you. I wonder if it will always be enough? Some day . . . Heaven knows . . . I don't. . . . If ever you're in any distress or difficulty—big or small, it makes no difference—I want you to remember that I'm completely . . . at your service. You understand?"

He dropped her hand, and moved away from her as though he could bear its contact no longer. The rosy sandstone of the colossi had faded into greyness; the reedy note of bees was no longer heard. He looked to her forlorn and piteous, dwarfed by the seated monster's stony immensity.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He turned and smiled most bravely.

"Yes, you are always sorry, like Criseyde. That's what I told you."

She dared not answer him. Her mind worked wildly in search of something that might divert his thoughts and her own into some less dangerous direction. She found it in the carved hieroglyphics of the fallen stone on which they sat, whose lines her fingers had been tracing unconsciously. She clutched at these as a means of escape.

"Can you read Hieroglyphic?" she asked him suddenly.

"A little. Why?" He was puzzled by her inconsequence.

"I only wondered," she excused herself hurriedly. "This

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thing with a loop at the top and a cross-bar and a handle. I'm always seeing it and wondering what it means. Tell me."

"Why do you ask me that?" he said intensely.

"I only wanted to know." She thought: "I've blundered again."

He gazed at her, anxious to be convinced of her innocence.

"That's *Ankh* . . . The Key of Life, it's commonly called."

"Even now you haven't told me what it means," she said.

"It means . . . the idea of life. Persistence. Living. Don't ask me any more or you'll embarrass me." He laughed. "All hieroglyphics, you see, are picture writing. *Ankh* is a phallic symbol."

"I'm sorry. I'm still in the dark."

"I shall have to leave you there, as I did with the work-song, about Halima, which you wanted me to translate." His voice became hard and irritable. "If you really want to know, you'd better ask Bredon . . . when you're married to him. Whatever has happened to that wretched donkey? I think, if you don't mind, we'd better begin walking."

They started off in silence. The cold light made Bezuidenhout's face look hard and old. She could not speak to him. She could only say again that she was sorry. Sorry for what?

Suddenly he cried: "Why, here they are. It looks to me as if there were two of them."

Under the grey walls of the Ramasseum two donkeys

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were galloping toward them. A native boy trailed helplessly in the rear.

"Lord, what a pace they're going," said Bezuidenhout. "Barley-Sugar won't like that." He stopped to focus. "Why, I believe it's Macadam, and that's the villain Mustapha running behind him."

Macadam, his black legs ludicrously trailing, galloped up to them, thrashing the donkey as he came. He shouted to them from a distance; his voice was strained and feeble:

"H. B.! H. B.! For God's sake take the donkey. And you, Miss Morgan . . . quickly! You're wanted, both of you."

He straddled off the donkey's back and hurried toward them white as death, the saliva of his shouting dribbled from his mouth. He spluttered at them:

"It's Bredon. He was working alone in the shed. One of the servants heard him call out. Thank God you're a doctor, H. B. . . . Thank God I found you! I think he's had a hæmorrhage. Take both the donkeys. I'll follow you."

V

FROM THE steps of Astill House, her face grey with the light of an unrisen moon, Mrs. Redlake hurried to meet them.

"Thank Heaven you've come, H. B.! Lucky I noticed you. Ruth, darling, don't be alarmed. It may be nothing."

"Where is he?" Bezuidenhout asked briskly. His doctor's voice was new to Ruth.

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"In the work-shed. I didn't dare to move him, though he wanted to walk."

"I'll go at once. Will you take care of Miss Morgan?"

"I must come too," Ruth whispered.

"All right, we'll go together."

They hurried after Bezuidenhout by the short cut through Redlake's study. Southwold, with scared eyes staring out of his ruddy face, was standing outside the door of the work-shed. He called inside to Redlake to warn him of Bezuidenhout's approach.

Ruth heard the calm voice of Redlake:

"It's all right, Bredon, the doctor's coming."

"What doctor?" At any rate Hugh could speak.

"Bezuidenhout. It's lucky he was here."

"Bezuidenhout? That man?" Hugh's voice was raised in protest. "I won't see him. I tell you I won't see him. I forbid you to let him come near. Redlake, you mustn't let him touch me!" The voice rose into a scream.

"My dear chap, be sane, be reasonable!"

"Redlake, I'd rather die . . ."

Bezuidenhout entered. Ruth and Mrs. Redlake followed closely behind him. Southwold, still vaguely disorientated, stood miserably at the door. In a flash of acute comprehension Ruth became aware of the room in all its detail. A long, whitewashed chamber, with two cobwebbed windows, and a low, tiled roof. At one end straggled the tripod of Southwold's camera, draped with its black velvet focussing-cloth.

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Midway, beneath a low-hanging lamp, stood a rough trestled table. On it, with head tilted backward and blank eyes gazing upward into the light lay the grey, shrivelled figure of a mummy, half unwound. Beside the table stood the painted coffin from which this fragile starveling had been lifted; and by the coffin, cushioned on the yellow mummy-bandages among which he had fallen, lay Hugh. His chin, his shirt-front and the writhen mass of linen were dabbled with blood. He lay and stared at them wildly; his eyes were full of hatred and terror.

"Don't let him touch me," he cried, "don't let him touch me, Redlake! Send him away!" The frightened eyes caught sight of Ruth. "Ruth—is that you?—can't you protect me from him?"

She fell to her knees among the bloody bandages and held his cold hand. Even in his weakness it resisted her; he had no thought for anything but Bezuidenhout's hated presence.

"Hugh, my darling," she whispered. "He's come to help you." She spoke to him as if he were a child. "Come now, my dear one!"

Bezuidenhout was stooping over him on the other side.

"Now, Bredon, don't be a fool . . ."

"I will not . . ." Hugh began.

"Hold your damned tongue! Speaking will bring it on again. Lie still while I look at you. Don't even breathe any more than is necessary. . . . Understand?"

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His brown hand firmly grasped the bloodless wrist in search for a pulse that was barely palpable. Hugh cleared his throat, as though he must protest again.

"Don't do that!" Bezuidenhout snapped. "Lie still. Don't cough. If you're in any discomfort swallow gently. Lie still as Christ on the Cross or that lady on the table."

He smiled. His smile was in curious contrast to the sharpness of his words. Above Hugh's prostrate body his head was very near to Ruth's. The masculine aroma of tobacco in his hair displaced another sickly, balsamic aroma with which the air of the room and Ruth's whole brain were saturated. He abandoned Hugh's wrist. He rose and whispered to Mrs. Redlake.

"A little nickel-plated case. . . . On the table beside my bed. . . . Ice, if it's possible. . . . Yes, you can't miss it."

An age of silence. Mrs. Redlake returned and handed him the hypodermic case. He struck a match and lit the sputtering wick of a tiny sterilizer. In a fascinated silence they watched the quiet flame. When it was ready he knelt again, turned up Hugh's shirt-sleeve and swabbed the alabaster forearm with a crushed ampoule of iodine. And all the time Hugh watched him with an absorbed and quiet hatred.

"Hold this." Bezuidenhout handed her the metal sterilizer. Its heat burned her fingers, but still she held it. He lifted the syringe with a pair of forceps; removed a fine-drawn wire from the needle's lumen. He filled the syringe with a colourless liquid; expelled the last air-bubbles. Then, with a deadly-seeming certainty, he plunged the needle-point

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through the black patch of iodined skin, and slowly drove the contents of the syringe home.

"There! That is all," he said. "Where is that ice?"

Mrs. Redlake handed him a tinkling saucer.

"Suck this," he said. And Hugh took it from his fingers like a lamb.

"Now quiet and immobility," said Bezuidenhout, rising. "Probably the morphine I've given him will send him to sleep. I will stay with him. There's no reason why anyone else should wait."

Hugh made a piteous movement of his eyes in Ruth's direction.

"Of course, Miss Morgan can stay as well," Bezuidenhout added.

The others faded away. After a long silence Bezuidenhout turned to her: "Miss Morgan, you can't stay on the floor like that, unless I bring you some cushions."

"My bedroom's next door," she whispered. "Pillows will do."

"Very well."

He went and fetched them. Carefully, still holding Hugh's limp hand, she made herself comfortable at his side among the blood-stained bandages. Wherever Bezuidenhout moved Hugh's dark eyes followed him with the same grudging intensity. It seemed as if all the life that was left were concentrated in those eyes.

Bezuidenhout established himself in a chair. He sat there staring down at them in silence. Ruth was aware of some-

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thing poignantly familiar in his pose. Something like this had happened somewhere before. In another life, perhaps, or in that confusion of consciousness we call time. It was hopeless to dream of running such vaguenesses to earth. Suddenly she remembered. The journey from Paris to Marseilles. Just so Bezuidenhout had sat when she watched him, on that first evening, from behind her paper. So many ages ago. . . . At that time she had not even known his name or been able to imagine what he was like. And now, unreasonably, she felt that she knew him as well as anyone on earth; as well as she knew Hugh. Now, at least, she knew the meaning of those brown hands, those instruments of precision, so strong, so delicate, which had driven the hypodermic needle into Hugh's forearm. And now she knew the meaning of that firm mouth, short-spoken, but the precise instrument of the calm brain behind it. She knew she had been right in imagining that this was a man who would show himself at his best in an emergency. That night he had proved it. But what she had not imagined, and now realized, was the beauty, the tenderness, the truth which he had revealed to her in the strange, the incredible meeting of that evening. And now, as often before, she found herself betrayed into comparisons between Bezuidenhout, with his grave eyes, his strong-knit figure, his abundant life, and the fragile, prostrate figure whose cold hand lay in hers: the drooping Troilus and sudden Diomedes. . . .

Why had he told her that story? Had he planned to tell it her? The thought was unworthy; it had arisen naturally out

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of the word Routh. Rather some inscrutable nicety in the machinery of fate had brought this poignant fable into his mind. Was he aghast, as she was, to realize its ironical fitness? All through that strange interview under the colossi, chance—if that were the word—had been assaulting them with symbols. But when she had tried to escape from one she had picked up another. The Key of Life. . . .

If Hugh should die! It was possible; the cold fingers that lay in hers had the feeling of death. A new wave of the ancient pity surged over her. He should not die. He must not. He was hers. She loved him. Bezuidenhout could save, had already saved him. She turned to Bezuidenhout's impassive face for assurance in her conviction, her desire; and the eyes of Bezuidenhout, without need for speech, answered her appeal and over-answered it: "I shall save him," they said. "You can trust me, because I love you."

Ruth lowered her eyes. "I am sorry," they told him.

"I know. Ruth is your name. It gives me great happiness, great pain." The sentence might almost have been spoken, she read it so clearly. He shaped his lips for actual speech. The spoken words were different:

"I think he's fallen asleep," he said. "If you can move your hand without waking him you'd better go and get some food. I will stay here."

She shook her head, returning his whisper:

"I am not hungry," she said. "It's only half-past eight. I'd much rather stay."

"I shall sit up all night in case of another attack."

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"And I'll stay with you . . . if you don't mind."

"Very well, you shall stay."

Half-an-hour later Mrs. Redlake came on tip-toe into the room with a tray of supper for them. Bezuidenhout signed to her that Bredon was sleeping. She stole close up to him so that he could whisper to her.

"I want to sit up and keep an eye on him," he said, "and Ruth has decided to stay with me. If you'll bring another blanket I'll make her comfortable."

"He *is* good, isn't he?" Mrs. Redlake whispered.

So that amazing vigil began. Thanks to Bezuidenhout's dose of morphine Hugh slept soundly. At times he gave a short cough, as though something choked him, and then, unconsciously, his fingers tightened on Ruth's hand. All through the night she and Bezuidenhout spoke no word, though once, midway between dozing and waking, she knew that he stole to her side and replaced the pillow that had slipped. She did not even thank him. It seemed to her that she, rather than Hugh, had been drugged by morphine, so dull she seemed, so monstrously fantastic were the thoughts that went marching through her brain. From this confusion of fatigue and of distress she awoke, in the small hours, to consciousness of an unusual clarity. Opening her eyes, she saw all things with a queer, an almost cynical detachment: that sinister work-shop with its bare furnishings; Bezuidenhout, still, as watchful as ever; herself unusually crouched on the pillows beside the sleeping Hugh, and, on the trestle table, four thousand years removed from love or suffering or pity, or any of the emotions

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that vexed their living minds, the shrunken, fragile figure of the priestess Henhenet; an ultimate symbol of mockery and negation.

The presence of that dead woman among their living selves aroused in Ruth not awe nor horror, but a sudden, fierce rebellion against all that it suggested; not fear of death, but a passionate love of life which showed her, as by some light of revelation, the dichotomy into which her spirit had split upon the rocks of Thebes. She saw her heart as a house divided against itself and doomed to choose or fall. A treble cleavage. On the one side Hugh, so loved, so pitiful; on the other, Bezuidenhout, strong in the inspiration of his vivid faith. On one side the sombre stability of the past; on the other the gallant challenge of the future. On one side life; on the other death. And between them, impassive arbiter, summoning to choose, yet contemptuous of her choice, the dust of what, four thousand years ago, had been the priestess Henhenet.

"If it were as simple as that!" she told herself. "What can I do?"

Her heart gave her no answer. Hugh turned his head and gave a long, a shuddering sigh. He opened his parched lips and moistened them feebly. He spoke; his voice was like the sigh of a spent wind.

"Ruth . . . is that you?" he said.

She put her head close to his:

"Yes, yes, my darling, it's I. You mustn't speak."

"Ruth . . . I'm . . . so . . . beastly thirsty."

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Bezuidenhout was at her side with a basin of ice.

"Give him a bit of this," he whispered, "don't disturb him more than you can help."

She took the ice and gave a piece to Hugh. It seemed to her as if the dry lips of her sister, the priestess Henhenet, smiled.

VI

NEXT EVENING, with infinite care, they moved Hugh, not to his own bedroom on the other side of the building, but to Ruth's, next door. Bezuidenhout was always at hand in case of emergency; in the morning he repeated his morphine injection, and Hugh submitted to it with the same dogged resentment in eyes whose pupils the alkaloid had contracted. Ruth sponged away the stain from his lips and chin. His long face had a yellowish pallor, and as he surrendered his other arm to the needle, he looked from Ruth to Bezuidenhout with an eerie glance in which mockery, hatred and suspicion seemed to be mingled. Bezuidenhout, absorbed in the nice performance of a surgical duty was unaware, or careless of the scrutiny; but Ruth, who had seen such looks before and knew what they portended, feared them, and was thankful that Hugh was not allowed to speak.

In the afternoon their old friend, the doctor from the Winter Palace, rode over to supplement Bezuidenhout's attentions. He was deliberate, guarded, and complimentary to his colleague.

"Beyond any doubt," he said, "Bezuidenhout has saved his

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life. A hæmorrhage from the lung: hæmoptysis, caused, probably, by some sudden exertion or emotional strain. You may console yourself that there's nothing obscure about it. The condition's common enough, and we know how to deal with it."

"A curious form of consolation," Ruth thought.

"But now it is over?" she asked.

"For the moment, yes. Of course he may have another. That's why we have been so extremely careful. Silence; absolute immobility, iced liquids; perhaps—Bezuidenhout will decide—more morphine. No, he had better not read, or be read aloud to. I've told you already that he mustn't speak. If he wants anything in particular he can let you know by writing. Give him a pad and a pencil. If he uses it too much, take it away from him." He turned to Hugh. "You see, Bredon, you're a prisoner. You can reduce the length of your sentence by good conduct. You're lucky to have Miss Morgan for a jailor, upon my word you are."

He smiled at his own small joke; but Hugh did not smile. Ruth followed him into the corridor as he was escaping.

"Doctor," she said. "I want you to tell me the whole truth about this."

He was gentle with her in his evasions.

"The whole truth? My dear child, I don't know it myself."

"It's serious?"

"Naturally. You can see that for yourself."

"What caused it?"

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"A condition of that kind may be caused by a number of things," he hedged. "Quite a large number."

"But, in this case, you suspect . . . ?"

"Doctors don't deal in suspicions. We limit ourselves to interpreting symptoms and physical signs. At present he's not really fit to be examined, so we have no data."

"But when you have, you'll tell me?" she persisted.

"Wait till we get them. I shall come again to-morrow. You've no need to worry, with Bezuidenhout so providentially on the spot. Of course . . ." He hesitated. "Of course it means that, for the present, we shall have to postpone the . . . er . . . happy event."

"I realize that."

She realized, also, that nothing more was to be got out of him. She returned to Hugh's bedside. Now that Bezuidenhout and the other doctor were gone he lay quiet and submissive with closed eyes. She was glad that his eyes were closed; they had troubled her. She was glad of his quietness, not only because she knew that it was good for him, but because, in that silence, broken only by the screaming of kites, his submission, his helplessness, made her feel more tender toward him, reminding her of those old, uncomplicated hours when she had found it sweet to nurse him at Castel Ditches.

All through the day he lay in a drugged docility. At evening, when the effect of the morphine had spent itself, he brightened up. Although he did not speak she knew that his mind was active. Out of her dream she heard him whisper her name.

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"No, no, you mustn't speak," she told him. She took the scribbling-pad and pencil and put them into his hands. His fingers grasped them like the tentacles of some slow-moving marine creature. Then they began to scribble rapidly. He stopped, and waited for her to see what he had written. She took the pad away from him, expecting, in these first words to find the thrill of some small tenderness.

It's wonderful, she read, I think the tattooing is unique. She was young and very beautiful, with fair hair, like yours. Nothing in the sculptures like her. Almost sure she isn't Egyptian. Quite a different type.

She stared at him in wonder. The words were the fantastic progeny of some delirium; and yet his eyes were calm, earnestly awaiting her comprehension. He grew impatient of her puzzled face; put out his hand again for the pad.

I've been thinking of her all night, he wrote. She won't let me get away from her for a moment, and I don't want to. The most astounding experience. The damned morphine may have helped, but my mind was quite clear, I want to know where she came from. It's a dark age. Difficult to look into. Damnably. You understand?

She did not understand. His eyes showed his impatience. He snatched the pad away and began writing so feverishly that she could scarcely follow the rush of ill-formed words.

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Lebanon, I think. Pepi the Second, five hundred years before, traded with Syria and the Ægean. That's how she came to Thebes—a slave, a captive from Memphis. She was a mountain girl, long thighed and fair and very slender. You can feel how light she was when you put your arm under her waist to lift her, as Mentuhotep must have done. She was wound in royal linen. There's hardly a wrinkle on her face. Her eyes were blue and her skin was the color of old ivory or pale honey. She's smiling now, as if you'd just awakened her by calling her name: Henhenet. After four thousand years! She's . . .

His fingers hesitated. Ruth felt that she could bear no more. She took the pad away from him. While the mad rapture spilled itself word by word upon the page, her mind, at first puzzled and incredulous, had grown numb with horror. Now she knew what he meant. All the night through, in pity and acute discomfort, she had shivered beside him, fighting, with the last ounce of her strength against the shadow of death, feeling that by the mysterious contact of their hands, some living force, the essence of her own vitality, was passing from her into his bloodless body. That night she had spent herself, utterly, giving all that she had. And all that night, as he told her, his mind, and more than his mind, had been set, not upon her who loved him, nor Bezuidenhout whose skill had saved his life, but on the fourth sharer of their ghostly vigil, the smiling priestess Henhenet, whose body, shrivelled by four thousand years, a ghastly

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imagination had invested with a life more real than theirs. The thought was terrible. A nightmare. There was madness in it.

But while she shuddered and crumpled the paper in her hand, as though, by destroying its physical presentment, the written word, she could demolish the hateful dream behind it, Hugh grew impatient again, and stretched out his hand.

She shook her head. "No, no," she cried, "I won't give it you. Hugh, you're excited, you're not yourself. It's wicked . . . I can't bear it." She knelt beside him and put her hand upon his brow. "I was wrong to let you write. My poor child, try to compose yourself. Try not to think of anything; it may hurt you. I will stay with you here, and you shall go to sleep."

Even as she pleaded she knew that she might just as well have spent her tenderness on a stone. His cold face strained away from her. She could not touch him. He didn't want her. There was scorn as well as impatience in the gesture with which he persisted in his demand for the writing-pad.

She held her ground: "No, no, you shan't have it," she said. "It's no good asking."

His cheek flushed slightly at her refusal. His eyes hardened. His lips formed themselves into a secret, bitter smile of defiance. Then, slowly, his right hand stretched out to the bedside table and captured from it the salmon-coloured volume that she had left there. Slowly, still smiling, he fumbled with the pages. His fingers turned the flyleaf with a certain purpose. He held up the open book for her to see the name

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that was written on it: *Hendrik Bezuidenhout* . . . held it tauntingly before her face and smiled.

Then, with an intent deliberation, he pencilled two words beneath the signature and showed it to her again.

Hendrik Bezuidenhout.

DESTROYER, SEDUCER, she read.

"Oh, but you're mad. It's unfair, untrue," she cried. "The man who saved your life!"

He wrote on the flyleaf:

Yesterday afternoon. You're lying. This book too.

"There's no question of lying. It's sheer hallucination. Can't I borrow a book? I've finished it. Give it to me: I must rub out all the mad things you've written."

He crossed his hands above the book to protect it. "Give it to me, Hugh," she pleaded. "Please give it to me." There was a devilry, solemn and elfish at once, in the way his weakness challenged her to violence and made her impotent. "Touch me and you may kill me," he seemed to say. "I dare you to!"

"You know that I daren't force it from your hands," she said. "Oh, Hugh . . ."

He knew. He had not finished. His face was motionless as a dead man's, but still he went on scribbling:

"Last night too. You were asleep. I was awake. And B. I saw him looking. I knew. You're not subtle, either of you. Why pretend?"

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"Hugh, for the love of heaven, believe me. This is some ghastly joke. By all that's holy . . ."

He laughed. A silent, diabolical gasping. She thought he was choking and took fright. She would have rung the bell for help.

"Don't be a fool," he whispered. "I'm all right. Look . . ."

The shock of his speaking brought her back to him. He was writing again: on the clean end-page this time.

Nothing holy for you or him. Why morphine? Why am I kept here? Hæmoptysis—his fingers stumbled over the word. Nothing of the sort! Blood-vessel in the nose. I was frightened, it choked me. Why do you stay here? I don't want you. Go to him now—go away with him if you like—and take him his damned book. I've finished.

He pushed the book away from him; he closed his eyes, and let his head loll over with a sigh. She picked up the copy of *Thais*; she wanted to rub away the vile accusations with which it was stained. The room was so disorganized that she did not know where to turn.

As she stood there, hurt, humbled, full of anger and distress, the comfortable figure of Mrs. Redlake swam into the room. She gave one glance to Hugh; then smiled, and put her finger to her lips.

"Sleeping?" she whispered. "Splendid!" She took Ruth's hand affectionately. "You poor dear!" she said; and this one phrase of common sympathy precipitated all the emotion with

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which Ruth's heart was swollen into a flood of uncontrollable tears. She leaned like a child with her head against Mrs. Redlake's breast and sobbed.

"Hush, hush, you'll wake him," she said in a motherly whisper. "You poor dear, come with me. You needn't take that book."

Ruth could not answer her.

"Just cry away," said Mrs. Redlake. "There's nobody watching, and I don't mind. It'll do you good. There now! That's better, isn't it? As soon as you're ready I'm going to take you away and put you straight to bed with a glass of hot milk. All that you want is sleep. Don't think of Hugh; he won't even know that you aren't there, and we'll look after him."

Without a word Ruth allowed herself to be taken to her room. She was thankful for Mrs. Redlake's attentions; for herself she had power neither for volition or thought: nothing but vague anger, and pity, and bewilderment. When Mrs. Redlake had left her she lay on her bed like a log.

Outside, the hot sky darkened. Night came. Once Mrs. Redlake entered with a lamp. Ruth closed her twitching eyelids and pretended to be asleep. The woman bent above her with an awed compassion, and softly went away again.

All through the night Ruth lay there, crushed, annihilated. Around, out of a pale, solemn sky, the moon distilled upon the desolation of Thebes her cold and deathlike day, chiselling a glacial beauty into the smiling lips of limestone bas-reliefs, painting the shadows of naked colonnades upon

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smooth dust, lighting a landscape that might well have fallen to earth from her desert globe. The mud-walled villages slept, assimilating their shape and colour to those of the rock to which they adhered. The temple aisles were empty. In all that entranced waste there was no life, no sound, no movement, save where the little jackals of Anubis slunk low, with their bellies almost brushing the ground, sniffing and snarling at each other in their lunar courtship, wailing like peevish children. Ruth heard them as she lay. She could hear nothing else. The moon had sunk behind the *gebel* before, without knowing it, she fell asleep.

VII

THE BEDROOM door slammed to with a gust of wind. A bright and blowing day. "But the wind's in the wrong direction, it's coming from the South," Mrs. Redlake explained. "If it grows stronger we shall have to call it *khamsin*. Now here's your breakfast. I suppose you've no idea what time it is?"

"I'm not awake yet," Ruth murmured.

"Eleven o'clock! That shows how badly you needed rest. I looked in once, before I went to bed. You were snoozing like a top. I mean to take good care that you don't get as fagged as that again. As a matter of fact there won't be any need—I'm afraid that toast is leathery, I'll get some more. What was I saying? Of course! I've got good news for you. The doctor surprised us all by coming for breakfast. He's de-

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lighted with Hugh's behaviour. He says there's no more immediate danger. The invalid may sit up a bit and eat and use his voice if he wants to. Now isn't that splendid? So particularly fortunate for us, because, as you know, H. B. is leaving to-morrow, and if Hugh were acutely ill we should feel so lost without him. And now, my dear, I think you'd better get up—that is, if you feel like it. Hugh has been asking where you were ever since he woke up. He'll never be contented till he gets you." She smiled. Another door slammed. "Those wretched servants! They can't remember anything. It's always '*Aiwa*' and '*Hadur*,' as solemn as if they'd give their lives for you. But when it comes to shutting doors . . . It's blowing up. I'm sure we're in for a *kham-sin*."

She went. Already, in the sky, the kites were trilling wildly, swooping and soaring on the wind like storm-maddened seagulls. Ruth rose and dressed herself miserably.

"I suppose," she thought, "I must go and see him. I have no heart for anything. If he's allowed to talk I shall hear the same old things."

Yet speech, she felt, however cruel, was preferable to the deadliness of words written in deliberate silence. The reflection reminded her of Bezuidenhout's copy of *Thaïs*. She must remember to return it to him. To-morrow, Mrs. Redlake said, he was going away. How furiously time whirled over this changeless place! To-morrow . . . "When he is gone," she thought, "I shall be quite alone." But before the book could

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be returned to him Hugh's venomous scribble must be erased. She set to work upon it with an india-rubber, and lived the hateful scene over again. She wrapped up the book, addressed it to Bezuidenhout without a word of thanks or commentary, and passed to Hugh's room with the numbed sensation of a prisoner going to the scaffold.

As she entered he flushed slightly, with shame or pleasure, and held out his hands to her. She took them in hers, but could not speak or feel; for the first time in her life their contact meant nothing to her. Quickly he became aware of her spiritual nullness; he was subtle to adapt himself to it; he was weak and humble.

"I was thankful to hear that you were sleeping," he whispered. "Ruth, you've been an angel to me."

She smiled wanly. Even this exhibition of the *vox humana* could not move her now.

"Ruth, I was not myself last night," he pleaded, stroking her hand.

Evidently he wanted to talk about it. Well, let him do so. She had a right to his penitence. She would meet him honestly.

"I think," she said, "you were more yourself than usual."

"I see you're still offended," he said.

"No, not offended. I feel nothing."

She was surprised at the calmness with which they were speaking.

"All this for poor Henhenet? How serious you are!"

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"I was shocked and frightened. You were serious too. You can't deny it. It was terrible to me. You wrote of her as if she were a living woman."

He sighed. "Ruth, Ruth, will you never understand that all the past is living to me?"

"No, that was different. Oh, quite different! You force me to say it. Almost as if you were in love with her."

She shivered as she spoke.

He smiled. "It's quite true in a way. I love all old and beautiful things."

"All dead things." The words came to her lips, but stayed there; but it was almost as if he had heard them spoken.

"You've been influenced by Bezuidenhout," he continued.

"Please do not speak of him. After last night I can't bear it."

"I want to speak of him. You needn't be hysterical. I've been thinking calmly about him this morning."

"You needn't. He's going to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" His face brightened. How well she knew him! "Ruth, listen to me," he continued. "I tell you, I've been thinking about him. I realize that I've been harsh to him, unjust. Even a heretic has a right to his opinions. I know that I'm his debtor. If it hadn't been for him I shouldn't be speaking to you now. The letter that I made you write to him was another foolish injustice. I'm sorry for it. I want to apologize."

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"No, no, Hugh; it's too late for that. He's going to-morrow."

"It isn't too late," he persisted. "Of course, after all that's happened, I don't expect him to come and see me again. I know I'm out of his hands. He doesn't even owe me politeness. But you can act for me, Ruth. You can see him to-day. I want you to see him, and tell him everything I've said to you this morning. You can do this for me and take the weight off my mind."

"No, Hugh, I can't," she answered.

The old look of suspicion clouded his eyes.

"That means you've already told him what I wrote last night? I see."

"I've told him nothing of it. I've too much respect for him. Please speak no more about it."

He relapsed into silence. Such meekness was inexplicable. He closed his eyes, but his fingers still declined to release her hand. She sat on miserably, almost unaware of them; and all the time her mind was seeking for some explanation of his sudden change of front. Before, she might have accepted it as a sign of penitence or generosity. She could no longer do so. His very gentle submissiveness filled her with distrust. There must be something sinister beneath it. What . . . ?

If he had really meant her to go to Bezuidenhout he would have persisted in spite of her refusal. It almost seemed as if that refusal had calmed him and set his mind at ease; in

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which case his request might well have been nothing but an experiment in vivisection, a test, a reaction, performed in cold blood upon her living body. Or else—and here the speculation made her heart beat faster—his purpose might have been more cynical still: to throw her deliberately into Bezuidenhout's arms. This was incredible. Hugh was too proud for that. Even if he had ceased to love her, his pride would not suffer a voluntary humiliation. And if he did not love her, why did he continue to hold her hand?

She realized, suddenly, that all these objective speculations implied a detachment from him that she hadn't ever admitted. Up to this point she had continued to take it for granted that they still loved each other; but surely, if she still loved him she couldn't submit his motives to this cruel dissection? The question was frightening. To accept its validity implied a readjustment of all her standards of thought. Out of the distance of yesterday she heard Bezuidenhout's voice. "*Pity's your name, Ruth. You're ready to pity all of us. And pity, at present, is enough for you. I wonder if it will always be enough . . .*"

Pity? Ah, no. . . . Perhaps it had been pity at first. Pity for the broken Christ, the fallen Adonis, symbols of all human suffering, that had stirred her heart when Dr. Hendrie had staggered upstairs with Hugh limp in his arms. But afterwards. . . . Those solemn, sweet Spring evenings when they had read together in that low-ceilinged room, in a dim, thrush-haunted tenderness. And then that day of days; the sky, with white clouds blowing; the cowslip meadows; cool

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woodland odours; white wild-cherry blossom, drifting downward on Hugh's transfigured lips. And had she not trembled when she opened Hugh's letters, hadn't she treasured them, word by word, as though her life depended on them? There was no pity in those exaltations, but love only. And could love offer more?

She didn't know. She only knew, this morning, that all those ecstasies seemed to be removed from her by a distance that not even imagination could span; that their reality was as poignant, but as unattainable, as that of dreams; that, though she reached out her arms to them in passionate reclamation, she encountered not so much an obstacle as a vacuum which broke the continuity of the ether through which the vibrations of thought trembled, leaving her impotent and amazed, as one who has lost memory. Neither imagination nor desire could cross that void. "Something has been broken," she thought. "Something has been broken. Perhaps it is my heart. . . ."

At midday the entrance of Mrs. Redlake saved her from further torment.

"Well, Ruth," she said. "How has the young man been behaving?" She glanced aside, discreetly, from their clasped hands. "I'm sure I needn't ask you. He looks quite different now that he's got you with him. Eh, what a thing it is to be young and in love! But now," she went on archly, "I'm going to tear you away from him. I told the doctor about your escapade last night. He's given his instructions, and I'm going to enforce them. If you're left too much alone you'll talk

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till you tire each other; so after lunch I'm going to put you to rest."

She took Ruth's hand and patted it affectionately with her sturdy, freckled fingers. Hugh was speaking:

"Is it true that Bezuidenhout's leaving to-morrow?" he said.

"So it has even come to doubting my word," Ruth thought.

"To-morrow evening," Mrs. Redlake answered innocently. "We shall be quite lost without him. It's a good thing for us that you got better before he went."

"In that case," said Hugh, benignly, "he won't have time to examine that priestess of mine."

"Oh, Bredon, don't bother your head about things like that. You're quite incorrigible, isn't he, Ruth?"

"I wish you'd ask the Chief if anything's being done," he persisted.

"I'll ask him; but I'm quite sure he won't tell me. He has too much sense."

"I'd like to see Macadam, too."

"Poor Mac! You nearly frightened him out of his life."

"You'll ask him to come and see me?"

"Perhaps."

"How do you expect me to get well if you keep everything from me?" he asked, with a flash of the old irritability.

"You can ask the doctor to-morrow," said Mrs. Redlake, good-humouredly.

"Come along, Ruth. No loitering! You must have a breath of air before lunch."

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She shepherded Ruth into the open and set her on her way to her room. The wind swept round the corner, whisking into her face, with a contemptuous flick of its tail, a cloud of dust and dry refuse from the work-sheds. A hot and spiteful wind, that made the skin sticky and the brain nervous. *Khamsin*. She had been taught to dread it. The gong sounded in the anteroom. Hurrying to its summons she remembered, at the last moment, the book which she had wrapped up and addressed to Bezuidenhout. She put it on the table in front of his chair. Entering late, he took it up and smiled across at her.

"You might have kept it," he said.

She shook her head. If he had known her reasons for wishing it out of her sight!

"What's that?" said Mrs. Southwold, always inquisitive.

"A book he lent me."

"What book?"

"A French book."

"Oh . . ." Mrs. Southwold did not read French. "Why didn't you say so at first?"

Their feelings were all on the surface, under their sticky skins. They talked about the *Khamsin* resentfully; one didn't expect a wind like that before March.

"The *Egyptian Gazette* says it's been raining in Cairo," said Nash, cheerfully.

Rain—fancy!—rain! How lovely it would be to feel rain on their faces!

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When lunch was over Mrs. Redlake accompanied Ruth to her room.

"This wretched wind may keep you awake," she said; "but even if you don't sleep you'll be able to rest. My multi-millionaires are coming over. Serves them right. I'll send one of the boys with your tea."

She drew the curtains, and left her. "Remember, you're off duty till this evening."

At half-past four Mohammed, the Berberine, arrived with her tea. His nerves, at any rate, seemed none the worse for the *khamsin*. He put down the tray on the table beside her; produced a letter from the folds of his white robe and gave it to her. She knew it was from Bezuidenhout.

I must see you before I go to-morrow, she read. I've something I want to say to you that I can't leave unsaid. I wonder if you could meet me on the East side of the Ramasseum. Six o'clock. If you don't come, I shall understand. I'll be there in any case.—H. B.

She tore the note into fragments, as though, before her conscience, it were critical evidence.

"I cannot possibly go," she told herself; "there is nothing more to be said, nothing to be gained by trying to say it."

She determined to put the matter out of her mind, telling herself that she had decided, and that there was an end of it; but still the letter agitated her and thrust itself upon her.

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What was this thing that he was bound to tell her? She found a dozen answers, all unsatisfying to her curiosity. "It's unfair of him," she thought, "to puzzle me like this. And clever of him, too. He must have known that I'd be curious. And yet I'm sure he wouldn't play a trick on me; he wouldn't have written unless it were something really important. What can it be?"

The question distressed her. "He ought to have realized the difficulty he puts me in. If he has anything important to say, he might have written it. He knows how strange Hugh is; how he'd be bound to misinterpret my going to meet him." And then she saw the lonely figure of Bezuidenhout, dwarfed, as she had seen it two days before, under the monstrous stare of the colossi. 'He'll wait for me,' she thought, 'expecting me to come. He'll wait there till it's dark, and then he'll think bitterly of me. And he'll have a right to think bitterly, for my not coming will convince him that I don't trust him. Which isn't true in the least. I do trust him absolutely. I'm only thinking of Hugh.'

Suddenly, out of the silence, Hugh's voice came back to her: "I want you to see Bezuidenhout; you can see him to-day, and tell him everything I said. You can do this for me, and take the weight off my mind." That was what Hugh had asked; but she had refused him. "If I hadn't refused," she told herself, "I could have gone without scruple. If I went now it would only be an excuse: because I want to go, because I'm anxious not to give disappointment."

An excuse, maybe; but a perfectly valid excuse.

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She rose from her bed and dressed herself. The *khamzin* still spat at the windows with venomous gusts; its heat penetrated the fly-netting and breathed on her face, like the foul breath of jackals in the legend of the hermit Paphnuce. Although it was only five the sky was sombre, as though that brutal wind were a solid body of darkness whirled between Egypt and the sun. Out in that dusty fury Bezuidenhout would be waiting for her. She sighed and sat down on the bed:

"I have half-an-hour to think it over," she said.

But at half-past five she could afford to temporize no longer. "It's a small thing," she told herself. "Hugh has absolved me. Why should I allow a trifle to make both of us unhappy?"

Happy, at least, to have made up her mind, she stole along the verandah and skirted the end of the house. The *khamzin* greeted her with a triumphant flourish, hurling a cloud of dust that staggered her and made her turn her back.

"At any rate, nobody will see me," she consoled herself.

The flag upon the peak of the women's tent was blown to ribbons; a broad fly of canvas flapped in the air like a whip-lash. Behind her, the sky over Dêr-el-Bahari hung powder-black; the ridge of the mountain looked crouching and harassed beneath it. All the accustomed clarity of the Theban landscape was dimmed to one wan monotone of dust. Down in the plain, between her and the colossi, the wind was made manifest in flying veils of opacity. There

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was no green beyond them, no villages, no Nile: nothing but a rushing of the hot, visible wind.

The *khamsin* fought so maliciously against her that sometimes she doubted if she would reach the Ramasseum. The village was a torment of flying chaff and ordure. Even the desperate dogs were cowering indoors. By one wild gust a dishevelled hen, rashly running for safety, was flung like a bundle of waste-paper against her legs. She laughed: "Why, that's exactly what I feel like," she thought.

Like island cliffs of storm-beaten sandstone, the black bulk of the temple emerged. In a moment of respite she ran for it, finding a shelter to which the wind, rushing overhead, gave the feeling of a vacuum in which her breath was sucked away from her. Her eyes so smarted with dust and sand that she could scarcely see. It was by sound rather than sight that she realized the presence of Bezuidenhout.

"So you've come," he was saying. "How brave of you! I didn't dream that it was going to be like this when I wrote that letter . . . I want . . ."

As he spoke the words were blown away from his lips.

He took her arm. "Come in closer to the wall."

"I think the wind's gone mad! How dark the sky is. It feels like the end of the world."

"I know. It's better here. Sit down beside me. Closer. I want to speak to you." He took her hand, as though he were anxious that her attention shouldn't be whirled away from him. "Ruth, this is the hardest job I've ever had to tackle. Delville Wood was nothing to it; but I couldn't go

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without having faced it. I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you horribly. I may shock you, too. I may make you hate me. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Yes, yes, I hear. Go on."

"I've got to speak about you and Bredon. D'you think you can bear it?"

"I don't know; but go on."

"Ruth, when we talked down here the other evening my mind was hot with things I wanted to say to you. I didn't dare to say them."

"I know. It was good of you."

"It wasn't good at all. It was merely cowardly. A school-boy's inhibition. This cursed English education that makes one afraid of being oneself, in other words. No honourable man is supposed to interfere between a woman and the man she's pledged to marry. Not even when he loves her, as I do you. You understand?"

She trembled: "Yes, I understand."

"Thank God for that, at any rate! That was two days ago. To-day I'm myself. Since then I've taken courage. Not because I love you. I don't shelter myself behind proverbs. And not because I'm at enmity with Bredon: I bear him no ill will whatever; I pity him more than I can possibly say. To-day I'm neither noble nor despicable. I'm beyond all that. I'm speaking as a doctor."

He paused and watched her anxiously; her set face showed no signs of any emotion; she was determined to contain herself.

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He went on:

"When first I saw him I had suspicions. I didn't like the look of him. Then came this hæmorrhage. I examined his lungs. Can you bear the truth?"

"Sooner or later I shall have to. I'd rather hear it from you."

"Tubercle. Advanced, progressive tubercle. It must have been going on for a year or more. Mrs. Redlake told me something about an attack of pleurisy."

"It was in England. Last April."

"Probably that was the beginning. This hæmorrhage . . ."

She interrupted him, as though she were not listening:

"Do you think he ought to be moved? Should I take him home?"

"In February? No. He's as well here as anywhere. Better. I don't think anything will make much difference. It's only a matter of time. Ruth, you can't marry him. That's what I want to tell you. You can't. You shall not!"

"Are you trying to frighten me? I'm not frightened. Hugh will be. He'd be lost without me."

"Ruth, it's impossible. The physical danger is nothing. But the spiritual sacrifice! It might be excusable if I thought you loved him. You don't . . . Ruth, *do* you love him?"

He waited pathetically for her reply. With deliberate honesty she answered:

"I don't know. Now that you've told me this it's different. I think . . ." She hesitated.

"You think you do," he broke in. "Oh, Ruth, you're so

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clear, so desperately consistent. Before I told you I could have guessed that this would happen. If I had wanted to throw you into his arms I couldn't have planned it better. That should show you at least that I'm not scheming for myself. All my cards are on the table. It's you I think of. I'm fighting with every atom of my soul and body to save you from this devilish pity that's going to break your heart and spoil your beauty and wreck your life. Ruth, do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"You think that you love him. You can persuade yourself; but that's not love. Madness! Hallucination! God, can't you see how you deceive yourself? Love is a thing of life; not this inanimate compassion that hovers like a ghost on the edge of the grave, accepting death. It's a live flame that laughs and exults and challenges death to its worst. The key of life; its uttermost expression! Ruth, you're so young, so vital, and you haven't begun to live. Like a young tree in winter. You exist, but nothing moves in you. Only pity . . . Even now you're looking backward, deathward. When will you wake? Is it this cursed place that's bewitched you? You sit there hypnotized, dazed with your pity; and while you dream and hesitate time steals round you, laying hands on your beauty, dragging it downward, backward, like a roped sacrifice. Doesn't the life in you protest against this horror? Don't pretend to me that it doesn't; I know you too well. I know that you hate it as much as I do. You know that it's evil, but the evil fascinates you; you're attracted to the ac-

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cursed thing. You cannot marry him. That would be the sin against beauty, the sin against life, the sin that is never forgiven."

He clasped her hands in both his own, as though she were swaying on the edge of a precipice, and he must save her. His ardour scorched her; his power proclaimed itself as a strong and living thing in her wind-tormented brain.

"Have you no will?" he said. "Take mine from me and use it. The past and the future, pity and love, life and death. Now you can choose between them. For God's sake choose before it's too late. Why don't you answer me? Yes, I know what you're thinking of. You think that I'm pleading for myself. It isn't that. Even though I love you I'm putting that behind me. Even if I were to lose you to-morrow I could be happy if I knew you were saved for life. Even if you loved me . . ."

"I do love you," she answered quietly. "Surely you know that?"

The words took him aback: "What do you mean? Ruth, it breaks me; it dazzles me. Oh, my sweet love!" He bowed his head; he kissed her clenched hands. His voice broke into a sound that was half speech, half laughter: "Ruth, I can't take it in . . . not yet. For the last week I've lived in hell, my darling. Without a hope . . . only the hope of saving you. And now . . . all in a moment . . . God!—it's unbelievable. Why didn't you tell me before? So silent, so secretive! Strange . . . you're as strange as you are wonderful, Ruth."

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She smiled; the words were very sweet for her to hear. She seemed to be rapt in mute, dreamy serenity.

"But we must think," he said. "What can we do? Bredon, poor devil . . . We must be gentle with him. Out of such happiness we can afford the pity of angels. Wait till I'm gone. A week or two . . . We can say nothing until he's more able to bear it."

"Say nothing? What do you mean?" Her bemused consciousness stiffened suddenly into life. "My dear, I don't understand you."

"Nothing about ourselves."

"That? Of course he must never know. Poor child, it would kill him."

"Ruth, we can't wait for ever. I love you. You say that you love me."

"And do you doubt it? Oh no, you can't. But there are other things. You wouldn't have me love you if I were disloyal, inhuman, undutiful?"

"What do you mean?" His voice was strangled. "We have no duty to anything but love. What do you mean?"

"You know . . . You know. You know that I can't leave him. You know that, if he needs me, I must marry him. Nothing else is possible."

"My God, Ruth! What are you saying?"

"You told me that I must choose. Really there was no choice. The choice had been made for me already. If Hugh had not been ill . . ."

THE KEY

"If . . . ! Oh, my love, my love! Listen to me . . . Think for one moment!"

"No, I can't think. Thinking's no good. Only be kind to me."

He took her in his arms. The brown hands enveloped her; his lips were on her mouth. She sighed, she let her harassed body melt away in his arms. Of course she could not think; she couldn't even listen to the words of love, of agony, of desperate persuasion that he poured into her ears. Only, through her mind, beneath his voice and the windy tumult that numbed her brain, flickered an obstinate memory: "This thing has happened to me before. When . . . when?" And from that howling darkness she was snatched backward to a second-class railway carriage thundering down the gradient into Dijon on its way to Marseilles: an old nightmare, transmuted into the sweetest of dreams.

How long that new dream lasted she could not tell. "I must not be cruel to him," she thought. "I must be patient with him. He loves me." But after a while the obstinacy of her silence chilled Bezuidenhout. His hands released her. He spoke in a dull and toneless voice which made her sorry for him.

"Ruth, it is getting dark. We must go. Give me your hand."

She thrilled to the bravery of his words. There was no one like him. As soon as they left the lee of the Ramasseum the *khamsein* hailed them with diabolical laughter. It overwhelmed them with a solid buffet of blown sand that made her cling

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to his hand as though she were drowning. It took them and shook them in its teeth, like a dog killing rats. All through the rising desolation of the *gebel* they could scarcely breathe. Not only words but breath it snatched away from them. At last the windows of Astill House shone through the blearing sand as through fog. Out of the darkness the broken fly of the women's tent kept up its monstrous flapping. On the brow of the rise they stopped and struggled to take breath.

"Here we must part," Bezuidenhout said. "I shall not see you to-morrow."

They stood, two shadows, and faced each other in the dusk. For an instant the wind fell to a silence that, somehow, must be broken. She shattered it with one quiet word.

"Good-bye."

Then the crouching *khamsein* leapt like a tiger upon them, blinding both, mercifully, with a cloud of the dust of death. When Ruth opened her smarting eyes to look for him Bezuidenhout was gone.

VIII

AFTER SUCH windy violence the quietude of the lighted corridor seemed ghostly. The last gust had driven in the drums of her ears so that all smaller sounds escaped them. She could hear nothing but a faint perpetual singing, like the fancied murmur of waves in dried sea-shells.

She found herself walking in the direction of her new room. No light was there. Fumbling she knocked against the

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tea-tray which Mohammed had not yet removed. She thought: 'What am I doing here? I must go to Hugh.'

So, with a new and dreamy concentration, she crossed the length of the strangely quiet house. She came to his door. A light was burning. She opened it softly. There was a smile on her lips. But the smile faded suddenly. Hugh's bed was empty . . .

A swift alarm stabbed her wide awake. She shuddered with the fear of some disaster. That morning the doctor had said that he should not move for a week at least. Why had they left him alone: Why had they left him? 'I must ring for help,' she thought. 'What is the good of ringing? Servants are no good. I must find Mrs. Redlake. At once . . . at once!'

She ran to the door of Redlake's study. It was locked and empty. She turned; she must make the circuit of the house—back past the empty room, that dreadful emptiness, round by the work-shed to the main entrance again. The work-shed. A light . . . thank God! Perhaps Macadam was there. Macadam would help her. She reached it; peered eagerly through the cobwebbed window. So quiet that nobody could be inside. All as before, just as on that awful night; a painted coffin, propped upright, obscuring half the window; the linen-bandaged feet of the priestess Henhenet helplessly extended upon the trestled table. But light poured from the doorway; the door was open.

She hurried onward and peered inside. There, at the head of the table, with one hand clutching a chair, as though he

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were dependent on its support, his white face ghastly above the Jaeger dressing-gown, stood Hugh, or the ghost of Hugh. He did not see her; he did not hear the sound of her footsteps or her caught breath. His eyes were fixed on the face of the priestess Henhenet, on her smiling lips. He gazed and was motionless; she was glad she could not see his eyes. Her body trembled with a sensation of nausea. He was no ghost. A white hand faltered out toward the mummy's breast. The movement released a cry from her.

"Hugh . . . Hugh!"

He turned and smiled at her. She ran to him and took him in her arms. "Hugh, Hugh, my poor darling, what are you doing here? It's wicked of you, wicked to have got up like this!"

He slipped his arm about her and drew her to him:

"Ruth, you're all smothered in dust. Your hair, your clothes, everything. You're as grey as a ghost. Where have you been?"

"Oh, never mind about me," she cried. "I've been for a walk. But you! Such wickedness! Hugh, how can I ever forgive you? Thank goodness I caught you, you naughty child! Now, you must come with me."

He smiled and pressed her hand.

"I know. You've a right to scold me," he said. "I was sick to death of lying there alone. And all the time one thing kept worrying me. I couldn't remember the number of blue dots in this lady's tattooing pattern. Now I'm quite satisfied.

THE KEY

They're five: like the dots on a domino. So now you can do whatever you like with me."

"Then come along, my darling," she said.

"If you hadn't deserted me," he told her, "I could have sent you to look. I thought you were never coming."

He bent and kissed her dust-grey hair with a gesture so pitiful that Ruth's heart melted within her into a strange, comforting warmth that choked her breath and pervaded her with the ecstasy, the exaltation of a mystical content.

ANACAPRI.

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